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Cowboy Mythology in National Politics:
The Pre-Presidential Political Career of Lyndon Johnson

by

Alyson Bujnoski

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Supervised by

Jeff Roche

Department of History

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Introduction

American news anchor Ted Koppel perhaps best summed up the appeal of Lyndon Johnson, the 36th President of the United States, when he said, “We like, as Americans, that sort of western image of the big, swaggering, broad-shouldered American coming into the town that is in trouble and clearing everything up.” Johnson is perhaps the first American political figure to fully embody cowboy, western, and frontier mythology.

Johnson represents an important shift in politics towards a strategy involving the conscious manipulation of imagery to achieve both local, statewide, and national electoral appeal. Most historians argue that Johnson’s conscious and overt manipulation of cowboy and western mythology began after his election to the Senate in November of 1948. In actuality, Johnson began to manipulate frontier myth as early as in his election to the House of Representatives in 1937.

Johnson, as candidate for Congress, Congressman, and candidate for Senate consciously participated in the development of a politically advantageous western and cowboy identity. The elements of Johnson’s voting record and persona he chose to emphasize in campaigns reflected both his internal struggle to define a political identity, and his efforts to move with the rapid shifts in political ideology occurring in Texas and the nation as a whole. Through the use of image, Johnson cultivated a political philosophy—a philosophy that combined elements of populism, the New Deal, and myth—in which he truly believed.

Essential to a full analysis of those forces that shaped Johnson's personal life and molded his political identity are several critical political biographies of Johnson. Johnson was an incredibly complex man. Perhaps this explains why there are so many different interpretations of his life. Many biographers of Johnson in a post-Vietnam era were exceedingly harsh. The Vietnam War served as catalyst for negative portrayals of Johnson. These portrayals are the consequence of what the war did to the nation, and because of this war, a generation of Americans can only see Johnson through the lens of Vietnam. However, more recently Johnson has enjoyed something of a rehabilitation in the minds of Americans and biographers alike because of a greater focus on the positive aspects of his presidency, most notably his Great Society programs.

Much of my analysis stems from these biographies: Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* series, *Path to Power*¹ and *Means of Ascent*², Robert Dallek's *Lone Star Rising*,³ Ronnie Dugger's *The Politician: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate*,⁴ and Paul Conkin's *Big Daddy From the Pedernales*.⁵ Caro's biographies present an image of Johnson as a conniving, manipulative man desperate for power. Dallek's biography of Johnson is also decidedly negative. Dugger and Conkin present kinder interpretations of Johnson's drive, while still demonstrating that Johnson was conscious of his manipulation of western mythology to achieve political goals. My

¹ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, (New York: Knopf: 1982).

² Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, (New York: Knopf: 1990).

³ Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, (New York: Oxford University Press: 1991).

⁴ Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate*, (New York: WW Norton & Company: 1982).

⁵ Paul C. Conkin, *Big Daddy From the Pedernales*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers: 1986).

work differs from the existing biographical literature of Johnson because it places much greater emphasis on Johnson's early recognition of the significance of frontier mythology to his identity.

Three works, Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything*,⁶ Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*,⁷ and Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*⁸ established the context of the cowboy, western, and frontier mythology that shaped Johnson's political strategies. *West of Everything* deals specifically with the dissemination of the myth through literature and film. My work uses *Gunfighter Nation* as a jumping off point into the world of myth. I use Slotkin's definition of myth to explain precisely what we mean when we speak of myths, which here are stories and symbols "drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain."⁹ Additionally, Slotkin's work provides my basis for an understanding of the violent, individualistic, masculinized strain of the frontier myth. *Virgin Land* provides the basis for what I argue is Lyndon Johnson's initial interpretation of the frontier myth: a feminized strain of the myth that is community-oriented and has a civilization-building and agrarian focus.

⁶ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press: 1993).

⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 1998).

⁸ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1978).

⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 5.

Also vitally important in establishing the proper context and environment in which Lyndon Johnson's political development took place were George Norris Green's *The Establishment in Texas Politics*,¹⁰ and Jordan A. Schwarz's *The New Dealers*.¹¹ Green's work takes the reader through a history of Texas politics and chronicles the divides that emerged in Texas just as Johnson emerged as a political force. Green's work is essential to my understanding of the political conditions and deep divide in the Democratic Party of Texas that allowed for the success of hillbilly Pappy O'Daniel and over conservatives. Schwarz's work provides context for the New Deal, its explosion in Texas, and Johnson's work with it. It helps illuminate important behind-the-scenes political maneuverings in Texas that led to Texas' place not quite in full support of the New Deal, but not quite against it either.

Johnson was a master of image and cultivated it most frequently through speeches, sometimes delivered in person, and in later years after he mastered technology, via the radio. This work makes frequent use of text from Johnson's speeches. Contained clearly in the speeches are the ideas Johnson valued and wished to express. Fundamentally, these excerpts from Johnson's speeches represent the type of image he strove to cultivate.

This work begins with a narrative account of Johnson's ancestors and life until 1937. It starts with the birth of a boy into a very specific place, the Hill Country. The land on which Johnson was raised played a large role in the politician he became, so

¹⁰ George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-57*, (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press: 1984).

¹¹ Jordan A. Schwarz, *The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, (New York: Vintage: 1994).

careful analysis of that land and the dream-destroying affect it has on people that live on it are also present. The difficulty of life on the land of the Hill Country, and how that difficulty led to Populism, an important political movement in Texas and a movement of vital importance in shaping Johnson's political ideas because of its emphasis on the feminized frontier myth's value of community, is discussed.

Following this context-setting, I move chronologically through time into an analysis of Johnson as politician from 1937 until 1941. I pay great attention to Johnson's win in the 1937 Congressional Election and analyze the reasons why it was politically advantageous for Johnson to cultivate a political identity based solely on support of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Platform. Johnson relied heavily on Roosevelt's platform because of the program's enormous popularity with farmers in Texas. This was important to Johnson because of his personal background with farming and Populism, which placed heavy value on the farmer.

Next, I take a brief journey into the world of myth. I establish what it means when we say "frontier," "cowboy," and "western." I examine two popular strains of frontier mythology, the violent, masculinized strain, and the community-oriented, agrarian, feminized strain that Johnson embodied in his early political career. I explain common signifiers of the west, including a particular posture and wardrobe, and examine how these signifiers and myths have been disseminated through a culture as to be powerful enough to have political significance. Here, special attention is paid to the origin of the cowboy dime novel and the popularity of John Wayne Westerns.

Following an explanation of myth, I examine Johnson's failed senatorial bid of 1941. Working within my established context of myth, I explain that Johnson lost the election because he failed to capitalize upon a populist appeal. I explain the important political lesson Johnson learned from his opponent Pappy O'Daniel's successful employment of myth and signifiers of the west—that populism and becoming one of the people is more important than telling the people what you will do for them.

Then, I move to the years 1941-1948 and examine how, even while at war, Johnson cultivated a political image that was in line with his interpretation of the frontier myth. Johnson evoked strains of both the masculinized and feminized versions of the frontier myth in his wartime positions. I use speeches to chronicle Johnson's frequent use of frontier mythology in his successful bid for reelection.

Finally, I examine Johnson's successful and complete employment of a frontier image in one of the most significant elections in Texas history—Johnson's bid for Senate against Coke Stevenson. Here, through his speeches and radio addresses, I present an image of Lyndon Johnson finally completely comfortable and self-assured in his role as western politician. I demonstrate his use of myth to great advantage. Then, I move to a brief analysis of Johnson's shift from using feminized version of the myth while campaigning to using the masculinized version of the myth while in higher office. I argue that this shift is responsible for the ultimate downfall of Johnson's political career—the Vietnam War.

Chapter One:
Pride, Poverty, and Populism:
Molding Forces of Lyndon Johnson's Early Life

To truly understand the transformation of Johnson's image that allowed him to become the political force that was the Lyndon Johnson of the House of Representatives and Senate, one must first understand the land where he was raised, his ancestors, his upbringing, and his early life. Since the end of his presidency, many biographers have chronicled Johnson's rise to power. There is, however, some disagreement on Johnson's true motivations at almost every important juncture in his life.¹² Though interpretations of these motivations may differ, and though we will never know straight from the horse's mouth Johnson's true motivations, there is value in a close examination of the forces that played a significant role in shaping Lyndon Johnson. Fundamentally, Johnson was shaped by the forces of a landscape that led people who lived there to a special breed of Texas populism.

Fundamentally, Johnson's early political journey and shift in image mirrors the story of the evolution of Texas and American politics at large. Lyndon Johnson's rise to power coincided with an America ready to accept populism on a large scale. Johnson successfully brought the power of the frontier myth of cooperation to a larger audience.

¹² Perhaps the most respected biographer of Johnson is historian Robert A. Caro, who presents a decidedly negative imagining of Johnson in his series *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982). I rely extensively on Caro in this chapter, but would be remiss if I did not also mention historian Robert Dallek's important biographical work *Lone Star Rising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Dallek's work strikes balance, presenting Johnson as a more complicated and morally ambiguous figure than the Johnson of Caro's work. Also important to this chapter is the work of founding editor of the *Texas Observer*, Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1982). These biographies are important in that they present themes that shaped Johnson's early life; these themes are the foundation upon which an analysis of Johnson's later use of cowboy and western mythology rest. Also of note: all three of these biographies (even Caro's) are sold in the gift shop of the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas.

Texas populism is precisely what Johnson's upbringing primed him to bring to a national stage.

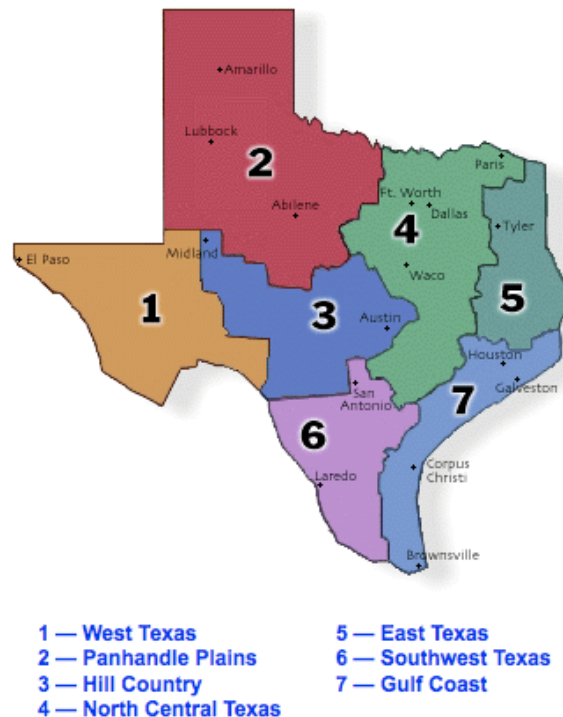
As important as an understanding of Johnson's ancestors themselves is understanding the land that shaped them. Most fundamentally, the Hill Country of Texas is "a trap—a trap baited with grass."¹³ Before Lyndon's ancestors arrived, the Hill Country lacked civilization. As the white man brought civilization to this land—at once stunningly beautiful and impossibly difficult; hard on dreams, but long on mythology—the land tamed the man, and Lyndon's ancestors, the idealistic Buntons and Johnsons were particularly affected by this land. Lyndon Johnson came of age on the land of the Texas Hill Country. This land was difficult, and this land helped shape the way that people including Lyndon Johnson viewed politics. Johnson's brand of populism and his own beliefs about the frontier myth were borne of this land and what living on and farming this land for a living does to individuals.

The mythology of the Hill Country and its special place in Texas history are important to an understanding of later themes Johnson used in his campaigns for the House of Representatives and the Senate. Johnson used these themes to evoke a feeling in the voting population of his district that they were in a place of mythic significance to America, Texas, and the frontier. Texas occupies a unique position in American geography—at once, it is both southern and western. The Hill Country is perhaps the first place in Texas to be considered a truly western space. Thus, the Hill Country served as sort of birthplace for all western and frontier myth in Texas. This place of hardship,

¹³ Caro, *Path to Power*, 8.

where cooperation and governmental assistance were crucial for success, was the birthplace of frontier myth in Texas and in the mind of Lyndon Johnson.

Figure 1: Geographical Regions of Texas



*The geographical regions of Texas, labeled by number. The Texas Hill Country is represented by number three and encompasses the central portion of Texas and most notably, the city of Austin.*¹⁴

The white men who first settled the Hill Country in the 1840s and 1850s were farmers who viewed it as a land of abundance.¹⁵ The settlers were largely southern mountaineers—rural immigrants desperate to make a living.¹⁶ The tall grass that grew in

¹⁴ ICUT, "Regional Map of Texas," *Independent Colleges and Universities of Texas*, <http://www.icut.org/RegionalMap.html>, accessed March 4, 2012.

¹⁵ Terry G. Jordan, "Hill Country," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryh02>, accessed March 04, 2012. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

¹⁶ Jordan, "Hill Country."

the Hill Country was a sign to these men that their crops would certainly grow, food for their cattle would be abundant, and wealth would come to them.¹⁷ What these men did not know was that this tall grass had grown over centuries, and its growth had only been made possible through prairie fires. The soil beneath the slow-growing grass was thin soil; the Hill Country was limestone country, a difficult place to grow crops because it produced fertile soil very slowly. This problem was compounded by the fact that the Texas Hill Country is, as its name implies, rather hilly. The thin layers of fertile soil that developed were particularly vulnerable to wind and rain.¹⁸ This made farming incredibly difficult and governmental assistance vital to the survival of those who made their livelihood farming.

In the Hill Country, there is a line of grave importance which early settlers did not understand. Perhaps if they had they would have abandoned this land. The line, called “isohyet,” is a line “drawn on a map so that all points along it have equal rainfall.”¹⁹ This line, coupled with the Hill Country’s unusually high rate of evaporation and uneven distribution of rainfall, meant disaster for farmers trying to produce crops: “east of that line...farmers could prosper; west of it, they couldn’t.”²⁰ It is crucial to emphasize that early settlers did not know they were crossing this line. Moving westward, moving to this Hill Country, was a way to escape poverty and pursue fortunes beyond one’s wildest dreams. These men did not and could not have possibly comprehended the ways in

¹⁷ Caro, *Path to Power*, 11.

¹⁸ Dugger, *The Drive for Power*, 26.

¹⁹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 12.

²⁰ Ibid.

which this land would break both them and their dreams. From an early age, because of the difficulty of the land his family farmed, Lyndon Johnson was cognizant of the important role government played in the daily lives of individuals.

It is important to examine Lyndon Johnson's ancestors particularly because Hill Country ranchers were "convinced of the importance of breeding."²¹ Though breeding typically refers to animals, here we speak instead of certain traits that can be born in a person, traits that are passed down from generation to generation and are inescapable. Johnson later came to understand that his ancestors and their ties to the Hill Country, a land of mythic significance, could be of special use to him in his pursuance of a political career. His ancestors were the people who made Texas. Three years before his mother died, she told Lyndon the stories of his ancestors, and with these tales, gave him "the authenticated venerability of their ancestors."²²

The first Bunton to set foot in Texas had such a strong personality that those who met him never forgot him.²³ John Wheeler Bunton, a hero of Texas Independence, signed the Texas Declaration of Independence. Bunton left his family with two traits that came to characterize them: ambition and toughness. In fact, ambition is the hallmark of what Caro refers to as the "Bunton strain." This strain was carried on by the next Bunton to go West: Lyndon's great-grandfather, Robert Holmes Bunton. The Buntons were unusual among frontier Texans in that they were "interested in ideas and abstractions."²⁴

²¹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 40.

²² Dugger, *The Politician*, 27.

²³ Caro, *Path to Power*, 4.

²⁴ Caro, *Path to Power*, 6.

Interested in ideas though they may have been, the Buntons also possessed a “hard, tough, practical side,” and the ability to be realistic about their big ideas.²⁵ Perhaps this is the most important element of the Bunton strain. Practicality made the Buntons adept at handling the difficult terrain of the Hill Country.

The Johnsons, like the Buntons, also had grandiose dreams. They thought they would “build an empire up in the hills.”²⁶ The Johnsons wanted to be cattle ranchers, but they were too often frustrated with the difficult terrain of the Hill Country. Sam Ealy Johnson Sr., Lyndon’s grandfather, was a Johnson to his very core. Johnsons tended towards romanticism and extravagance, and had a larger than life temper. Like the Buntons, they were big dreamers. Sam Johnson Sr. married a Bunton, Eliza, a practical woman who believed “charity [began] at home.”²⁷ While the Buntons had the ability to tailor their dreams to reality, the Johnsons were “not prudent and practical.”²⁸

The Johnsons were representative of a phenomenon that occurred in post-Civil War Texas. Texas enjoys a role as crucial part of what Americans imagine as the stereotypical Old West. Americans tend to view Texas as a land where the rancher and heroic cowboy live. This image is based upon the men that came to Texas pursuing big dreams. The majority of men who came to Texas with the Johnsons in this post-war period from 1865-1890 were cattle ranchers.²⁹ These men closed the Indian frontier all

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Caro, *Path to Power*, 25.

²⁷ Often, Eliza Bunton invited struggling members of the community to her home to offer food and a kind work. Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 29.

²⁸ Caro, *Path to Power*, 28.

²⁹ Randolph C. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*, (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press: 2004), 290.

the while expanding the cattle frontier and contributed to the myth of Texas as a place that is western.

Texans, including these cattle ranchers, took decisive action to rid the Texas frontier of buffalo and Indians so that this frontier could be a place for their cattle. From 1874-1880, these Texans engaged in battle with thousands of Comanches, Kiowas, and Southern Cheyennes. By 1881, the vast majority of Indians were gone from Texas and the Hill Country.³⁰ Through conquering these Indian foes and largely ridding the Texas frontier of buffalo, these men opened the way for Texans to raise cattle. This is what brought the Johnsons to Texas and to the Buntons.

Thus came the complicated mixture of the Bunton and Johnson strains. The three sons of Sam Johnson and Eliza Bunton had fierce passion, high ambition, and potential for leadership, but they also possessed the “fatal taint” of the Johnson blood line:

Johnsons, they said, had all of the Buntons’ temper, pride, arrogance, and idealism, together with dreams even more ambitious, but they had none of the Bunton hardness, the canniness and pragmatism, that alone could keep idealism and ambition from bringing ruin in a country as hard as the Hill Country.³¹

This mixing of Bunton and Johnson strains is one of the most essential pieces in a complete understanding of the driving forces of Johnson’s life. Lyndon Johnson was driven by massive ideas and goals, and possessed a Texas-sized ego to match. Fundamentally, he was the man he was because of the emphasis his family placed on these traits.

³⁰ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 296.

³¹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 40.

To go into the rolling hills and dry soil of the Hill Country took courage and big dreams, something that Lyndon's Johnson ancestors had in abundance. It cannot be stressed strongly enough, however, that the Hill Country was not a landscape conducive to the fulfillment of dreams. The reality of the Hill Country was rock. For most people, and most particularly for farmers, rock is not conducive to dreams. Rock is the opposite of conducive to dreams; rock is despair; rock is poverty; rock prevents crops from growing. Those hoping to grow rich from this land had one of two choices: "plow it or graze cattle on it." If either of these things was done to the Hill Country, however, it would "blow or wash away."³²

"Principles, noble purposes, [and] high aims" were qualities not practical in the land of the Hill Country. Unfortunately, these qualities were the most defining qualities of Lyndon's ancestors. Of a person, the land required an abandoning of all dreams and a strong, pragmatic approach to dealing practically with problems. From this perspective, it seems clear the Johnsons were particularly unsuited to such a land.

Sam Johnson Sr. lost his money betting on the future successes of the Hill Country. This loss drove him to join the Populist movement. Through the South and West, a sentiment grew among men, particularly farmers, who felt trapped by forces beyond their control: forces of nature and forces "too big for them to fight."³³ This was a time of desperation in Sam Johnson's own life and in the lives of farmers in the Hill Country. Generally, farmers believed it to be the duty of the government to deal with

³² Caro, *Path to Power*, 25.

³³ Caro, *Path to Power*, 33.

their issues because the government, through their “vast subsidies of land and biased laws” were the reason for the farmers’ major problem: railroads.³⁴

During the late 19th century, railroads served as western landlords. Railroad companies owned massive tracts of land in the West, which they sold to farmers for a profit. Farmers of the West were encouraged by these railroad companies to try their hand at growing cash crops in order to quickly repay the loans they took out to purchase their land. Cash crops often proved profitable in the short-run.³⁵ However in the long run, many farmers became dependent on single crops and their markets, and thus were overly sensitive to market fluctuations.³⁶ Combined with the already difficult land of the Hill Country, this was economically disastrous to Hill Country farmers. An article in the April 28, 1887 edition of the *Progressive Farmer* magazine summed up the attitude and concerns that drove farmers to join the Populist movement:

There is something radically wrong in our industrial system. There is a screw loose. The wheels have dropped out of balance. The railroads have never been so prosperous, and yet agriculture languishes. The banks have never done a better or more profitable business, and yet agriculture languishes. Manufacturing enterprises never made more money or were in a more flourishing condition, and yet agriculture languishes. Towns and cities flourish and ‘boom’ and grow and ‘boom,’ and yet agriculture languishes. Salaries and fees were never so temptingly high and desirable, and yet agriculture languishes.³⁷

³⁴ Caro, *Path to Power*, 36.

³⁵ The most common cash crop in Texas? Cotton.

³⁶ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press: 1978), 36.

³⁷ Kenneth G. McCarty, “Farmers and the Populist Party, 1870-1900,” *Mississippi Historical Society*. (<http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/163>), accessed March 5, 2012.

Here, we see enumerated the essence of the Populist movement. Populism, and particularly the Texas Populism Sam Johnson participated in, was about the frustration of a group of people who felt that they were not getting a fair deal from the government. It was a movement concerned with the growth of big business and the decline of agriculture. The movement valued governmental assistance for farmers because it placed great importance on the role of agriculture in America.

The Populist Party was the party of the people of the Hill Country. The reality of the Hill Country was trying to scratch out a living with very few raw natural resources. This brutal reality made people of the Hill Country particularly susceptible to movements like Populism. These were people who wanted their government to intervene and fight for them. The Populist movement took the shape of a group of farmers oppressed by their land, wanting and needed governmental assistance in major ways. From government, these people sought an advocate and a force that would protect them from the strengthening influence of big businesses. The Hill Country was, quite literally, a frontier. This Populist movement was the stuff of which popular Western entertainment was made. These ideas were important to Sam Johnson Sr., and would remain important in the lives of his children and crucially, in the life of his grandson, Lyndon. Populism was in Lyndon's DNA.

The agrarian reform movement known as Populism found political expression in Texas as the People's party, which evolved from the Grange, the Greenback party, and the Farmers' Alliance into the most successful of the third-party movements in state history, though by 1900, it was largely incorporated into the Democratic party. The program had

as its major demands the preservation of land from large and alien landowners, regulation of transportation, and increase of the amount of money in circulation.³⁸ How money was created and circulated defined the relationship between farmers, urban workers, and big business. This relationship defined who controlled the rules and the money, and determined which Americans made an income necessary to maintain “a living of some dignity.”³⁹ The history of the People's party in Texas demands particular interest because the party benefited from a grass-roots communication structure. Movement toward establishing a third party in Texas began in the late 1880s and culminated with the formal organization of a Texas People's party in 1891. It was under this party that Sam Johnson Jr. ran for a seat in the House of Representatives. Though Johnson lost, his political affiliations are of great importance in tracing Lyndon Johnson's political development. Populism expressed an important vision for America's future. Johnson took elements of Populism with him, particularly elements that emphasized the value of the common man, and used them to great advantage in the development of his cowboy image.

In addition to an examination of Populism, it is crucial to our understanding of Lyndon Johnson to pay special attention to the political moods of the place that shaped him. Texas, and the Hill Country in particular, are places with deep political complexity and competing interests at work. The world in which Lyndon Johnson came to political maturity was a changing one, but in Texas, the place from which Lyndon got his sense of political being, 19th century values that included racism, reigned supreme.

³⁸ Also important concerns to members of the Populist movement were tax reform, trust regulation, preservation of land, and regulation of transportation. Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement*, 55.

³⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement*, 9.

Texas is unique among states in that its history is treated with near equal importance to American history. It has a reputation for producing national leaders, and it has a political climate all its own. Though depictions of the frontier as an individualistic place are nothing more than the stuff of myth, perhaps because of their long history of struggle with the land and foreign occupiers of that land, Texans value individualism and self-sufficiency, and think of this as a characteristic of their frontier heritage. Even today, candidates who come from Texas often wear cowboy hats and call themselves ranchers. All of this is a reflection of Texas as a place that is western. Fundamentally, however, Texas, at least since the beginning of the 20th century, has been caught between its southern and western political heritages. Texas is a hugely complex place. Any single list of qualities that we might label "Texan" will be partial, overly static, not applicable to everyone in the state, and maybe even internally contradictory. Lyndon Johnson was born into this struggle, and this struggle shaped his politics.

Between Reconstruction, the period after the American Civil War, and World War II, powerful interest groups dominated Texas politics.⁴⁰ Forces like railroads, ranching, and later oil, gas, and sulfur exerted significant influence on state government. These powerful, money-hungry industries rarely experienced any opposition in their quest for total domination of the political interests of the state, as most Texans had a certain fondness, or at least acceptance of the practice of big business and conservatism. In this way, Texas was very much a southern place. Johnson, however, descended from ancestors with an agricultural background.

⁴⁰ George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, CN, 1979), 12.

The Populist movement, with which Lyndon's grandfather was associated, occurred when the plight of the majority became so unbearable, a rebellion against the conservative forces that controlled Texas was in order. The state, nearly without exception, fell back to conservatism because big business' grip on the state was too tight for the little people—the farmers, the ranchers, and the working man—to overcome.⁴¹

The Texas in which Lyndon Johnson came to political maturity was a Texas that maintained the values of the Old South patron system. The primary purpose of government in Texas was preservation of the social order. The various strands of Texas political culture can be boiled down to three main ideological tendencies: economic liberalism (faith in a free market economy) combined with social conservatism (favoring traditional values and moralism), overlaid with populism (promoting the rights and worthiness of ordinary people).⁴² This is crucial—that the populism in which Lyndon Johnson and his family believed was about promoting and helping ordinary people. These tendencies intermingled and overlapped to create a turbulent political culture unique to Texas.

The history of the Texas party system reflects the political heritage of the rest of the old South, including secession from the Union and racial segregation. But the party system in Texas is also shaped by other equally important currents that it shares with western states, like its focus on concerns with issues like ranching, farming, and the problem of water. Even today, historians don't seem know just where Texas fits.

⁴¹ When we speak of conservatives here, we refer to the more conservative wing of the Democratic party in Texas. From 1836-1952 the Democratic party had a complete stronghold in Texas politics. Conservatives typically opposed the Populist party platform in favor of big business, particularly railroads and oil. Green *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 9.

⁴² Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 6.

Certainly Texas feels southern. Texas history is inextricably linked to the history of the South. Texas seceded with the South and maintained a southern perspective on race issues. Populism is essential to understanding the history of Texas as a state that has a western political culture. Populism, fundamentally, is about the little man (in this case the farmer), standing up to government forces who seek to bleed him dry. Populism is about taking a stand and fighting back.

Perhaps in actuality, Texas *is* more southern than western. But here, the real question of importance is what Texans choose to identify with: a southern heritage or a western heritage. Johnson's ancestors and Johnson himself chose to identify with both Texas' mythic and concrete western heritages. Johnson, in his campaigns for elected office, saw political advantage in such identification. When he discovered campaigns would be won or lost based on Populist appeals and the cultivation of a western image, he chose to de-emphasize the southern and play up the western. Johnson's identity was shaped by a place that is, in actuality, neither completely southern nor western. In Johnson's speeches and radio addresses to the people of Texas while running for Congress and the Senate, we don't see him engage in the southern issues of the day. He ignored issues of race entirely. Instead, we see him engage with the problems faced by farmers and the symbolism of the West. He spoke of bringing electrification to towns, controlling rivers and dams, and securing relief and aid for ranchers and farmers. He didn't act or dress like he was a part of the old boys network in the South. Instead, he wore cowboy boots and took special care to be photographed around cattle and on a horse. For Johnson, the answer was clear: Texas was a western space.

Sam Ealy Johnson Jr., son of Sam Ealy Johnson Sr., and father of Lyndon Baines Johnson, stayed in the Hill Country like his father before him. Sam Jr. had ambitions to be something greater than a farmer. He wanted to be a lawyer, but the realities of his life meant he needed to make money, so a cotton farmer he became.⁴³ Despite the difficulty of the land, Sam Jr. had several successful years as a farmer. Because of his success, image was of particular concern to Sam, who residents of the Hill Country recall frequently said, “you can tell a man by his boots and his hat and the horse he rides.”⁴⁴

After several years as a farmer, Sam was nominated to represent the 89th District in the Texas House of Representatives. Though nominated as a Democrat, “the Populist Party may have been dead, Populist principles weren’t.”⁴⁵ Sam saw the concerns of the people of his district—their struggles with the land and their unease with railroad and oil companies and the ways in which these businesses siphoned their profits—as fundamentally Populist concerns, so he addressed them as such and found success using this platform. Though Sam was inexperienced, in the legislature, he found he had the an “unteachable gift for...persuasion.”⁴⁶ Ultimately, Sam was “one of the few legislators who did not fail on a single measure.”⁴⁷

1906 was a year of both great success and tumult in the life of Sam Johnson Jr. Reelected to the Legislature, Johnson gambled too much and went back to his job thousands of dollars in debt. His second term was not wholly unsuccessful; Sam wished

⁴³ Caro, *Path to Power*, 42.

⁴⁴Perhaps this is the root for Lyndon’s posturing obsession with image. Ibid.

⁴⁵ Caro, *Path to Power*, 43.

⁴⁶ Caro, *Path to Power*, 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

to run for a third. Other viewed him as a hard-worker and hero for his refusal to compromise Populist ideals. Ultimately, what destroyed Sam Johnson's chances for a long-lasting political career were these high ideals, for not all members of his district were sold on his appeals to Populism and farmers. So, by the time Lyndon, his first child, was born, "Sam Johnson had lugged his dreams and ideals back to Hill Country," and back to his wife, Rebekah Baines.⁴⁸

It is important to examine Lyndon's relationship with his father, a relationship fraught with conflict, but at its core, a relationship of great admiration and respect. Much of Lyndon's behavior and motivations for behavior can be traced to the relationship he shared with his father, a relationship that changed before and after his father lost the Johnson family's money.

In 1913 Sam and Rebekah Baines, Lyndon's mother, moved their family to a three-bedroom home in Johnson City. Johnson City was not a picturesque, wealthy, or exciting town, but attempts by historians to make it seem the definition of poverty are misguided. Sam Johnson was a successful man by Johnson City standards. When he made money, he used it to purchase more markers of wealth and success. Sam bought expensive boots, Stetsons, and the "biggest and most expensive car in the whole Hill Country."⁴⁹ Image remained of utmost concern to Sam Johnson.

Most children seek attention, and in this respect, Lyndon Johnson was not unique. There are countless stories told by a myriad of people who knew him in any and all capacities to support this assertion. What is more important, however, is how Sam

⁴⁸ Caro, *Path to Power*, 49.

⁴⁹ The car was a Ford. Johnson City was, again, not a wealthy or exciting town. Caro, *Path to Power*, 62.

responded to Lyndon as a child. During Lyndon's youth, Sam Johnson was a model of fiery ambition and competitive spirit. Lyndon sought to emulate his father, and succeeded in these ambitions by becoming even more competitive and aggressive than his father.⁵⁰ Sam Johnson was a natural politician who, along with his wife, cared deeply about politics. He fostered an environment for his children where passionate political discourse was the norm.

Sam Johnson returned to the Texas Legislature in 1918, but remained a farmer to make his money. Sam began to deal in real estate and invested tens of thousands of dollars into a land that was fundamentally unstable and difficult to cultivate.⁵¹ By 1922, Sam Johnson was deep in debt. He could hardly grow cotton, and the cotton he could grow would not sell because of reduced demand.⁵² He had an enormous mortgage, and owed the bank on money he borrowed to buy equipment for his farm. This failure broke Sam Johnson as a man and changed him as a person. No longer was Sam Johnson a respectable man in the eyes of the residents of Johnson City. In fact, the Johnsons became "the laughingstock of the town."⁵³

The Johnsons were a family deeply concerned with image, and thus, were a family of great pride. This economic fall, along with crippling his pride, changed how

⁵⁰ Caro, *Path to Power*, 74.

⁵¹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 86.

⁵² High demand for cotton during World War I stimulated production, but a drop in prices after the war led many tenants and sharecroppers to abandon farming altogether and move to the cities for better job opportunities. In the 1920s, the federal government's control program cut acreage in half and foreign countries who previously bought Texas cotton began to grow their own. Fred C. Elliot, "Cotton Culture," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/afc03>, accessed March 05, 2012.

⁵³ Caro, *Path to Power*, 97.

Lyndon saw his father. No longer did he want to emulate his father. Instead, Lyndon sought to escape the ruin his father brought upon the family. Lyndon went from carefully watching and emulating his father's every move to going out of his way to be disobedient. Lyndon's ambitions were not halted by this economic downfall; rather, the economic fall was fuel for the flames of his burning desire to become important. Lyndon's sharpest defiance to his parent's wishes was in regards to his education, an area his parents found particularly important.⁵⁴ For his first eight grades, Lyndon attended the Junction School. For ninth grade, he went to the Albert School. Lyndon caused disruption in the classroom, and often refused to do work, but teachers recognized his brilliant mind.⁵⁵ As he progressed in his schooling, he continued his contentious relationship with his father which became wrecked with "an unusually violent strain of competition."⁵⁶

In the spring of 1924, Lyndon graduated from high school. Desperately, Lyndon's parents begged him to attend college, a clear road out the Johnson City they viewed through the lens of poverty. Lyndon, still angry, refused. Johnson refused to go to college because college was important to his parents. He saw the value his parents assigned to their high ideals and the importance of college in achieving these ideals. He saw what this had gotten them, and rejected college. Instead of college, Lyndon went west to California.

⁵⁴ Caro, *Path to Power*, 100.

⁵⁵ Caro, *Path to Power*, 101.

⁵⁶ Caro, *Path to Power*, 103.

During his time in California, Lyndon worked in his cousin's law office and lived in a "comfortable home."⁵⁷ Lyndon's cousin Martin had an easy solution for Johnson's lack of education. He believed he could bypass several restrictions and make Lyndon a lawyer without attending college at all. Ultimately this was not the case, and when Lyndon found out, he returned to Johnson City as a man marked by the heavy weight of disappointment, and possessing a new desire to secure an education that would lead to the kind of future he imagined for himself.

To say The Southwest Texas State Teachers College at San Marcos was not a college of high standards is incorrect. The Southwest Texas State Teachers College was a college of lowest regard. To call it a college at all at the time Lyndon attended, in 1927, requires a bit of hyperbole and suspension of disbelief. At San Marcos, he wrote for the school paper. Johnson excelled at debate, and was greatly influenced by the debate coach, H.M. Greene, who liked his ability to tear down the arguments of others. In 1928, Lyndon's financial status became too grim for continued attendance of college. He dropped out of college to teach at a Mexican school in Cotulla, a job that paid \$125 a month.⁵⁸

In Cotulla, Lyndon experienced a type of poverty he had never encountered. The children in Cotulla had no lunch hour because they had no lunches to eat. In his work, Johnson was described as "a teacher Cotulla had never seen."⁵⁹ Johnson was raised with the (at the time) radical idea that every person, right down to the struggling farmer, had

⁵⁷ Caro, *Path to Power*, 125.

⁵⁸ Caro, *Path to Power*, 165.

⁵⁹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 167.

worth and deserved help to reach their potential. Johnson cared if these children learned, and he devoted his intensity towards their education. Johnson wanted to be the best, the most notable at everything he did. But there was something different in his teaching years in Cotulla. This intensity and ambition was coupled with an equally fierce pity and desire to help these poor children that can be tied to Johnson's own experiences with Populism.

As a teacher in Cotulla, Lyndon worked to secure better futures for the children at his school. He purchased volleyball nets, sheet music for choir, and musical instruments. He attempted to foster an environment of competition at the school, and provided his students with opportunities to compete in "contests for spelling, speaking, and sports."⁶⁰ Lyndon encouraged other teachers at the school to become as involved in the lives of their students as he was himself. There is no real explanation offered by any historian as to why Johnson did these things for the children of Cotulla, and perhaps there is no true explanation to be had. We will never understand Johnson's complete motivations. However, what we do know about Johnson's early life suggests that though Lyndon had a deep and powerful thirst for power and ambition, he also had some great desire to affect positive change in the lives of others and the political background in Populism to do it. According to Johnson himself, it was in Cotulla "that [his] dream began, of an America...where race, religion, language, and color didn't count against you."⁶¹ Johnson

⁶⁰ Often, Johnson himself would participate in debate competitions. In his role as debate coach, students remember Johnson as one of the most intense and passionate men they had ever met. Many of the students Johnson coached went on to become teachers themselves because of the thirst for learning he instilled in them. Dugger, *The Politician*, 116.

⁶¹ Dugger, *The Politician*, 115.

dreamed of an America where the average person, *any* person, could succeed, and where the government was willing to take action to help people succeed.

Lyndon returned to San Marcos College in 1929 and immediately entered campus politics. Johnson campaigned his way to senior class representative of Student Council, an election which he won by one, technically stolen, vote.⁶² This aggressive campaigning was a preview of the Lyndon Johnson who would run for the Senate in 1948. It was at San Marcos that Lyndon first discovered his willingness to do what it took to win, and it was at San Marcos that Lyndon first won. The most important message to take from Lyndon's years at San Marcos is the early emergence of methods he would later use to win more serious elections:

The desire to dominate, the *need* to dominate, to bend others to his will—and the manifestation of that need, the overbearingness with subordinates that was as striking as the obsequiousness with superiors had been evident at San Marcos.⁶³

This desire, this need, had to have come from something. Was it because of the cruelties of the Hill Country that made Johnson into “a shape so hard it would never change?”⁶⁴ Was it the Populist principles he was exposed to and carried with him during his time in Cotulla? Ultimately, it was a combination of these factors coupled with a growing awareness of what one must do, of the persona one must adopt, to successfully create a national identity with which to dominate the American political landscape.

⁶² Caro, *Path to Power*, 180.

⁶³ Caro, *Path to Power*, 200.

⁶⁴ Caro, *Path to Power*, 201.

After college, Johnson taught public speaking at Sam Houston High School. Johnson ran his debate team with, in what had already become a recurring theme in his life, boundless energy and soaring ambition. Lyndon threw his whole self into his team. He had high standards for his pupils, and made sure they recognized he was the one who held control and power. Johnson enjoyed his teaching job, but then he received a call from newly-elected Congressman Richard Kleberg, who wanted Johnson as his private secretary; Lyndon Johnson made his way to Washington.

Richard Kleberg was a wealthy man whose Congressional career is of little note. He had little interest in politics, and felt out of place in Washington.⁶⁵ Lyndon had a sharp learning curve, and was among the most unsophisticated of the secretaries in Washington. However, “once he knew how to do things in Washington, he started doing them—with...frenzied, driven, almost desperate energy...”⁶⁶ In fact, because Kleberg simply didn’t care to do his job, once he found his footing, Lyndon was “congressman-in-fact. He ran the show.”⁶⁷

As Kleberg’s secretary, Johnson began work unusually early, and left work unusually late. Johnson was able to make significant impact in Washington because of his hard work and convincing manner. People respected him, including his boss, Congressman Kleberg, who, though he did not believe in it, was persuaded by Johnson to vote for the New Deal. Also notable in Johnson’s time as Kleberg’s secretary was his takeover of the “Little Congress,” an organization of House secretaries. Johnson became

⁶⁵ By most accounts, Kleberg was only elected because of his enormous wealth. Kleberg rarely participated in actual voting or Congressional duties, preferring to stay in Texas. Caro, *Path to Power*, 220.

⁶⁶ Caro, *Path to Power*, 225.

⁶⁷ Dugger, *The Politician*, 170.

speaker of the Little Congress, and through this duty, learned “a good deal about the members of Congress—their enemies back home, drinking problems, and fears of the next election.”⁶⁸ Even as mere secretary, Johnson used others to his advantage and gathered information that he recognized would be significantly helpful to his future.

His growing reputation allowed secretary Johnson to make valuable connections that would serve his political career: “a network sprung up, a network of men linked by acquaintance with Lyndon Johnson, who were willing, because of Lyndon Johnson, to help one another.”⁶⁹ Johnson created for himself a network of men who could and would help him in Texas.

While acting as secretary to Kleberg, Johnson enrolled at Georgetown Law School where he met his wife. Lyndon asked Claudine “Lady Bird” Taylor to marry him the day they met. Lady Bird came from a comfortable family, and their marriage in 1934 was of political advantage to Lyndon because of the money that came with it. Lady Bird’s entrance into Johnson’s life allowed him to make an important political ally: Sam Rayburn. A friend of his father’s from the Texas Legislature, Rayburn was man with whom Lyndon tried to cultivate a significant a relationship. These attempts were initially fruitless because Rayburn said he would bring his wife to dinner with a single man. However, after his marriage to Lady Bird, Lyndon could invite Rayburn to dinner.

Johnson succeeded in breaking down Rayburn’s walls, and Rayburn quickly became something of a mentor and father figure to Johnson. Most importantly, Rayburn was an activist on behalf of Lyndon Johnson. It was Rayburn who lobbied Texas Senator

⁶⁸ Dugger, *The Politician*, 174.

⁶⁹ Caro, *Path to Power*, 289.

Tom Connally, who had a meaningful voice in selection of the position of Texas NYA director.⁷⁰ Connally agreed to Rayburn's proposition of making Johnson NYA director, but the White House refused to accept his recommendation. So Sam Rayburn went to the White House, and though there is no record of what was said, with Rayburn's help, Lyndon Johnson was made the NYA director for the state of Texas.⁷¹

The National Youth Administration, or NYA, was established by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a part of his New Deal in 1935 to "give students jobs to help them stay in school and to employ non-student youth in public works."⁷² Johnson saw many benefits to his new position, and chief among these benefits was that "he could build local and state-wide contacts for future campaigns."⁷³ Johnson approached his job as he had approached all others in his life. He demanded a great deal of his employees, but he himself worked longer and harder than any of them. The NYA program was on particular success in Texas.⁷⁴

As leader of the NYA in Texas, Johnson planned schoolyard construction and roadside parks projects that employed 15,000 youths in Texas. In a move that was unusual for a Texas politician, but made sense in conjunction with the the populist ideals Johnson believed in—that all of the people, and especially the little people, have worth and deserve help—Johnson spread the benefits of the federal government's assistance

⁷⁰ Caro, *Path to Power*, 340.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Dugger, *The Politician*, 174.

⁷³ Jordan A. Schwarz, *The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.: 1993), 269.

⁷⁴ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 142.

beyond color boundaries.⁷⁵ Perhaps Johnson viewed his position with the NYA as a way to build contacts, but this position also allowed him to help the disenfranchised. In what would become another theme typical of his career, here, Johnson excelled in a position that allowed him to help others using the power of government.

⁷⁵ Schwarz, *The New Dealers*, 269.

Chapter Two: The Creation of Myth: From the Frontier to John Wayne

Before one can begin an analysis of Lyndon Johnson's use of cowboy and western myth, which began nearly immediately after his time as NYA director in Texas, one must first examine what precisely we mean when we say cowboy and western myth. The words "western" and "cowboy" conjure powerful imagery in the minds of Americans. To be a cowboy is to be entrenched in a particular narrative that has been developed through literature and film in 19th, 20th, and 21st century America. Lyndon Johnson understood these narratives and understood the strength they held. Johnson knew that the cowboy narrative was a narrative accessible and appealing to all Americans, regardless of race, gender, or class.

Critical to our discussion of cowboy and western mythology is the frontier, that area of the American landscape that remained unsettled longer than any other. Most important to the discussion of the importance of the American frontier is American historian Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Speaking to the American Historical Association in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Turner responded to a statement from the U. S. Census of 1890 that stated the American frontier had closed.

Turner's thesis proposed that the American frontier explained why America developed in a distinctly different manner than European countries. He believed the fluid frontier situation coupled with a population facing new and unpredictable problems of the frontier not only forced them to be leaders, but also provided a variety of unique effects on American society. Turner asserted that the frontier provided a type of

seeming boundless opportunity which prevented America from developing a class consciousness and encountering an acute class struggle— a struggle pervasive in most European countries. Turner’s thesis proposed that the frontier also produced a uniquely American kind of democracy. Turner’s thesis is the base on which the idea of American exceptionalism rests, and is the popular historiographic rationale for both “Republican progressives and Democratic liberals.”⁷⁶

Through Turner’s thesis, we see the influence the frontier had on political thought and the emergence of political ideologies in America. However, perhaps more powerful than even these ideologies is the mythology of the frontier, which is fundamentally the mythology of cowboys and the West. The American frontier is the mythic birthplace of democracy in the West. Texas contained frontiers longer than other American states, so Texas took on a role as a place of mythic significance in the West. Cowboys are real people and the West is a real place, but more important than these real places and people that are exist are the mythic importance we assign to these places and people. In this way, because of this mythic significance, cowboys and the West have become much more than places and people. They are cultural touchstones, accessible to nearly all people in America.

Myth is best defined as a story “drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness with all the complexities and contradictions that

⁷⁶ The most well known and respected work on the western, cowboys, and construction of myth is Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 1998). Slotkin’s work is crucial in this analysis of myth, but he is, as one who came of age in the 1960s, deeply interested in discussing the Cold War, Vietnam, and its implications for Johnson’s presidency. However, his work is still valuable and applicable to analysis of an earlier Johnson because though what we apply them to may change. the myths themselves do not.

consciousness may contain.”⁷⁷ Over long periods of time, and through retellings that are passed through generations, these stories become “conventionalized and abstracted” until they are reduced to “a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols...”⁷⁸ When we speak of the cowboy and western mythology, we are referring to a specific set of symbols that resonate with all Americans. When Americans hear the word “cowboy” or “western” or “frontier,” they think of a specific set of images that color their understanding of an entire historical context.

Fundamentally, myths exist to serve a culture.⁷⁹ Myths are a production of society designed for the consumption of members of that society, so myths hold particular power in the society in which they were conceived. As such, cowboy and western myths have particular poignancy among Americans. Cowboy and western myths are pervasive, and exist in both mass media and folk culture. Cowboy and western myths are at once national and local. They are ideas rooted deep in the American consciousness, but are ideas that also have strong significance in Texas folk culture.

We must be clear what we mean when we refer to western and frontier mythology, for there are two myths of the frontier: a masculinized version: the myth of violence, individualism, and self-reliance and a feminized version: the community-oriented, agricultural-focused strain of the myth. When we speak of western mythology, we are speaking of these two narratives, both of which were important to Lyndon Johnson’s political image and style.

⁷⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 8.

The first of these frontier narratives is one of terrible violence. This imagining of the violent frontier continues to provide patterns of identification and legitimization for a violent streak in American society:

The savage enemy kills and terrorizes without limit . . . in order to exterminate or drive out the civilized race (and) the civilized race learns to respond in kind. A cycle of massacre and revenge is thus inaugurated that drives both sides toward a war of extermination.⁸⁰

In this visioning of the frontier, frontiersman is gunfighter. The frontiersman is concerned with domination, both of other cultures and of nature. The notion of a savage warfare between frontiersman and Indian suggests a racist, and perhaps even genocidal imperative. The frontiersman lacks a clear moral imperative. The frontiersman, in this myth, takes on the role of morally ambiguous bandit. Fundamentally, this version of the frontier myth is reliant on one critical assumption:

the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization.⁸¹

Also central to this system of belief was a heavy emphasis on the necessity of violence through conquering other races to maintain social order for the greater good. According to this version of the myth, we can only understand what it is that makes us Americans through the lens of violence. We are asked to accept that our society is only successful when it exerts power over individuals or groups of individuals that do not belong. This myth asks Americans to honor the men that facilitate subjugation and dominance.

⁸⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 112.

⁸¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 10.

This violent frontier myth has disturbing implications both politically and for individuals. Whereas early settlers and frontiersmen could achieve fulfillment and a sense of progress through the conquering of new territories and annexation of new lands, once the frontier was closed, Americans were forced to look for new sorts of conquests, and this resulted in the discrimination and disenfranchisement of many groups of Americans, including the poor, racial minorities, and immigrants.

Additionally, American political leaders used this frontier myth of violence to justify involvement in foreign conflicts. With the Spanish-American War and American involvement in the Philippines, President Theodore Roosevelt began the trend of allowing the frontier myth to color the world of foreign relations. For Americans to keep their sense of progress, Roosevelt suggested they must take up the challenge of empire and bring civilization to third-world countries.

Later administrations would also invoke this violent frontier mythology to justify their involvement in foreign affairs. Particularly relevant is the example of the Johnson administration's involvement in Vietnam. The Johnson administration used the frontier myth of violence to rationalize and validate the United States' escalation of combat forces in Vietnam. This myth—that violence is permissible and even necessary to secure the United States' continued dominance in the world—was a powerful tool for the Johnson administration to put a positive spin on unpopular policy decisions and military tactics.⁸²

⁸² For all of its worth, Slotkin's work is deeply colored by its obsession with assigning responsibility for the Johnson administration's failure in Vietnam to this violent frontier myth. Slotkin ignores the value to be found in an analysis of Johnson's campaign strategies to the second strain of frontier mythology, that of self-reliant cowboy, with a rugged streak of individualism.

The feminized strain of the frontier myth, a more positive interpretation of the cowboy spirit and the frontier, places emphasis on an individual's ability to struggle through a difficult environment. This myth is more localized than the frontier myth of violence, and stresses the importance of working together and forming communities of self-reliance. It focuses on the idea of bringing civilization to a place that has none, and through this civilization, bringing order and a type of self-government that is willing to help all people to be successful.

The creation of this mythic figure in the feminized strain of the myth, this cowboy and frontiersman who rode into a town on his horse, and helped a community to work together towards self-reliance, was largely created in Texas folk culture, a culture that came to define America's most central values. Though this myth still presented cowboy and frontiersman as strong and capable of violence, in this interpretation of the myth, violence was not emphasized as a force that was crucial to the domination of other cultures and of nature. Rather, violence, in this form of the myth, is presented as a means to an end, something to be avoided, but something that is justifiable if necessary. The power of this western myth is that it does not celebrate violence; rather, it celebrates the coming of civilization to a place.⁸³

Where in the masculinized interpretation of the frontier myth there is gratuitous and racialized violence for violence's sake, in the second strain of the myth, there is more emphasis on the figure of cowboy with a heightened sense of morality and duty to a community. Additionally, it is in this form of the myth that symbols we

⁸³ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1950), 108.

associate with cowboys become meaningful. Frontiersman is not primarily presented as gunslinger in this form of the myth. Instead, he is presented as rancher and cowboy, someone who carries a gun, but would rather ride in on his horse and engage the enemy in a less violent way.

In this feminized version of the myth there is a focus on the agrarian over the Indian-hating gunfighter of the masculinized version of the myth. In this form of the myth, there is respect afforded to men who value agriculture and the land. The focus is placed on the man who acquires a title to a farm and raises his children to value and respect the wilderness.⁸⁴ In the feminized version of the myth the agrarian utopia is emphasized: a place where farmers are valued and children grow up to respect the land and continue an agricultural tradition. Implicit in the form of myth is a deep respect for land and nature. There is no emphasis placed on domination or subjugation of others. Rather, emphasis is placed upon the strength of the agricultural community, banding together to create a place where civilization and nature can coexist. This kind of “garden,” a nature fenced in by the cooperative civilization brought by farmers to a land is a crucial element of the feminized strain of frontier myth.⁸⁵

The masculinized frontier myth was a theme important to Johnson’s later career and strategical decisions in Vietnam, and it provides the lens through which most historians analyze Lyndon Johnson. However, the feminized strain of the frontier myth is the myth from which Johnson drew in his early political career. If we ignore the hold that

⁸⁴ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 155.

⁸⁵ Even as early as 1875, there were important problems with this view. An agrarian utopia myth does not engage with the problems that occur in a land like the Hill Country, where soil is difficult and there is little rainfall. Smith, *Virgin Land*, 195.

this first myth had on Johnson is his campaigns for Congress and the Senate, we ignore a vital piece of Johnson's history, explanation for his hold on the American public, and his comfort with expressing ideals of cowboy masculinity in his work in politics.

The mythology of the frontier was largely created by those who were outsiders to the frontier.⁸⁶ As such, the origins of this folklore are complex and not always entirely accurate. It is not necessarily accuracy that matters, however, for what is disseminated in a culture—what all in a culture are exposed to in all forms of media, sometimes in versions that are presented as fact—is what becomes true of a culture. Cowboys did not conquer the frontier. Not all cowboys wore boots or Stetson hats. However, because of mass media and folk culture's dissemination of these myths, these myths have become akin to historical fact.

It is also crucial to note that these western myths were also created and widely disseminated through popular culture including pulp fiction, television, and film. The first and most notable novel of the western fiction genre was Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Written in 1902 and set in the Wild West, Wister's novel was the first true western written other than tiny dime novels. The novel describes the life of a foreman of a ranch in Wyoming. It is narrated by an unnamed narrator, and chronicles that narrator's reactions to a rancher known simply as the Virginian. The character is terribly violent. At one point in the novel, the Virginian must participate in the hanging of a cattle thief who had been one of his good friends. The hanging is depicted as a necessary response to the government's corruption and lack of action, so the Virginian carries through

⁸⁶ Mody C. Boatright, *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier*. (New York: The Macmillan Company: 1949), 2.

because of a sense of duty and obligation. *The Virginian* can also be read, however, as the tale of a stakeholder coming into a territory and bringing civilization that is uncorrupted by government influence to that territory. At once, pulp fiction could embody both strains of the myth.

Wister's work paved the way for future generations of writers to define the narrative structure of the western genre. It is through these novels that the western became formulaic. In particular, Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* contributed to what Americans imagine when they think of cowboy. Grey wrote *Riders of the Purple Sage* in 1912. The novel is set in Utah, so the force of antagonism in the novel is religion, in this case, Mormonism. The character Lassiter, who dresses all in black and rides in on his horse to restore order, is protagonist of the tale. Depicted as morally ambiguous, Lassiter represents both virtue and vice at once.

Grey describes Lasseter as a gentle-voiced and sad-faced man who is a hater and killer of Mormons. This description seems contradictory, but here we see the contradictory nature of the cowboy narrative. In novels and narratives like *The Virginian* and *Riders of the Purple Sage*, heroes of the story are not all good. Instead, they are complicated human beings, at once morally upstanding and willing to kill to enforce justice in a lawless land. Ultimately, we almost always view these heroes positively, and there are greater implications in our world for this attitude. Because of cowboy tales, and this cowboy narrative that includes violence, we learn to see violence as a necessary means to an end, even for those that are morally upright and seek to bring order and safety to a place.

This narrative structure continued in movies of the 1900s for “from roughly 1900 to 1975 a significant portion of the adolescent male population spent every Saturday afternoon at the movies. What they saw were Westerns.”⁸⁷ Lyndon Johnson was one of these boys. Johnson descended from a long line of frontiersman. He lived an authentic cowboy experience, but simultaneously he was exposed to the media’s portrayal of the West, a portrayal than involved one man more than any other: John Wayne. The most popular movie star in America, even after his death, was John Wayne.⁸⁸ John Wayne was the actor most synonymous with the western genre of film. His image will forever be denotative of what it means to be a cowboy— that is, what it means to walk and talk like a cowboy. Without John Wayne and the western films he made, there would be no consistent pictorial representation of what it means to be a cowboy. John Wayne is a major reason why the signifiers of the West are so significant to Americans. They are all present in his portrayals of cowboys.

Perhaps most powerful in his portrayal is Wayne’s stance. When he played a cowboy, Wayne looked unconquerable. Before Wayne, the figures that stood for the west and the frontier experience, figures like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Buffalo Bill, were rooted in fact that turned into myth. Wayne’s portrayal of cowboy was entirely rooted in myth, but for many Americans, became more true than an actual cowboy experience. Wayne was so easily identifiable as a westerner that he became another symbol of the West. When we think of the posture of a cowboy, we think of Wayne,

⁸⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press: 1993), 5.

⁸⁸ Gary Willis, *John Wayne’s America*, (New York: Literary Research, Inc: 1997), 11.

Other actors need to be built up- by camera angles, lighting, costume, blocking of crowds, suppression of others' positions- in order to command the scene. Wayne's power was such that *others* had to be built up to give him credible opposition.

Wayne had a powerful on-screen presence. He was tall and strong, overwhelming on screen. The Stetson hats he frequently wore only contributed to this height and feeling of overbearingness. Fundamentally, the Western deals with the taming of the West, and Wayne was a convincing tamer because of his inherent strength.

Additionally, Wayne had what looked like effortless control over his enormous body. His actions, even actions that demonstrated enormous power, looked casual and controlled. There is something overpoweringly sexual about the way Wayne interacted with the western environment: the way he rode his horse and the way he stood with his hands on his hips and pelvis thrust slightly forward. All of these actions worked to draw attention to the fundamental feature of Wayne's masculinity: his penis. There is enormous power in this type of swagger. Wayne looked confident in his masculinity. Wayne sexualized cowboy, and this sexualization added power to a myth already strong in the minds of Americans. After Wayne, cowboy was firmly solidified as a masculine role. The role's physicality became just important as the narrative structure had been to novels. To be a cowboy, a penis, and a pretty big one at that, was necessary.

Figure 2: John Wayne



Wayne shows off his signature cowboy posture, Stetson on his head. steed behind him.⁸⁹

It is also important to note elements of Wayne's performance as cowboy that became signifiers and symbols of what it means to be western. In his films, Wayne always wore a large Stetson, adding height and a sense of masculinity. His feet were constantly in cowboy boots, and he entered the scene on his faithful steed. He looked at one with nature, almost like he grew out of the environment. To be a cowboy, at least in Wayne's sense of the word cowboy one had to be tough, hard, and unforgiving. These symbols are powerful and resonant, because Americans saw them time and time again. The reality of the these symbols does not matter. What matters is what they evoke, and they evoke cowboy.

Westerns were accessible to Americans of all economic classes, age groups, and genders. Because of this, Westerns, and cowboys, the heroes of Westerns,

⁸⁹ <http://westernposterpage.com/wayne.htm>

became the basis for imagining a national hero.⁹⁰ Lyndon Johnson discovered this, maybe really always knew it, and used it as the basis for the creation of a national political identity, an identity that was so successful because it could reach all Americans. Johnson knew western narrative. He knew the power of the feminized strain of the myth he chose to emphasize—a group of resilient people, banding together working to achieve the common goal of success for all. Additionally, Johnson’s image centered around the symbols and signifiers of the west: a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, a horse, a ranch, and an overwhelmingly masculine presence. We see this message come through loud and clear in his campaigns for the House and Senate.

⁹⁰ Tompkins, 5.

Chapter Three: First Defeat & Lessons Learned

By the time Roosevelt decided to run for a third-term, anti-New Deal sentiment in Texas began to manifest itself in a number of strange ways. Perhaps the strangest expression of this anti-New Deal sentiment came in the form of the political career of one W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel. O’Daniel and his electoral success represented the power of an appeal to the common people—a lesson Johnson should have learned from his early exposure to Populist ideals. O’Daniel’s electoral victory against Johnson inspired in Johnson an understanding of the benefits of a conscious manipulation of the ideals that were so deeply entrenched in his being. Through his manipulation of language, image, and use of new media to disseminate his message, O’Daniel exposed Johnson to a new type of politician—one who valued image over message.

In 1937 when James Buchanan, a Congressman from the Tenth District of Texas, died, Lyndon resigned from his post to run for the House Seat, thus moving from administrative to electoral politics. Along the way, Johnson learned valuable lessons about the nature of politics and the electorate—and Johnson was a fast learner. Alvin J. Wirtz, a Texan who admired Johnson’s tenacity, was one of the most important advisers to Johnson’s 1937 campaign. Once a member of the Texas Senate, Wirtz was a proponent of FDR’s New Deal, and knew Johnson was an ideal candidate to express these ideals in Washington.⁹¹

Central to Johnson’s strategy was running on a platform of the New Deal. Nationally, Franklin Roosevelt was an overwhelmingly popular president. Johnson

⁹¹ Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, (New York: Oxford University Press: 1991), 146.

recognized any identification with a man so popular would be politically advantageous, so from day one, he ran his campaign as a surrogate Roosevelt. He made clear he was the candidate with closest ties to Roosevelt.

A close examination of the twenty-four radio addresses and speeches from the 1937 campaign available at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum in Austin, TX, reveals a clear initial strategy at play—complete and total support of President Roosevelt and the New Deal. In a full twenty of the twenty-four speeches he delivered during the campaign, Johnson spoke to a platform with two planks: first, the needs of every member of the tenth district, and second, unequivocal support of President Roosevelt, his administration, and his policies.⁹² Johnson never attempted to support a program not supported by the President, or even to distinguish himself in any meaningful way from the President.

I believe this District should have as its representative in Congress a man who is wholeheartedly committed to support of the President's entire New Deal program. Let me make it plain that I am for every part of it...⁹³

Johnson told the District he wanted to represent in no uncertain terms, he would represent them as a sort of surrogate for the President, supporting issues the President would also support. He focused on only the most national of issues, the New Deal.

Indeed, Johnson, in his radio addresses, made clear that the central issue of the campaign, the only issue that mattered really, was full support for the President.

When we get down to the facts in the matter, there is only one

⁹² Autin, TX, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1937.

⁹³ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Address Over KNOW, 11 March 1937," Speech Files, 1937, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1937.

issue in this campaign. Are you for the President, or against him? Are you going to let the President down? The Tenth District knows that. The Nation knows that. It awaits and expects a thumping verdict: 'We are for him. We won't let the President down.'⁹⁴

Johnson's strategy demonstrates that from very early in his career as a public political figure, he recognized the importance of employing a particular political personality to capitalize on a national mood. What is important to note here is that Johnson does not delve into specifics of policy. Instead, he makes an emotional appeal to members of the Tenth District centered around a very popular president. Here was Johnson's recognition of the need to run on a national platform. The political climate of the nation leaned towards support of President Roosevelt, so Lyndon also supported President Roosevelt. He won the election decisively.

The special election he won in 1937 for Congressman in the Tenth Congressional District of Texas marked a turning point in strategy for Congressman Johnson. Before and in 1937, it was advantageous for Johnson to run for office as a nationally-minded political figure because of the enormous popularity of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the depth of economic problems facing the nation as a whole. Johnson was product of the New Deal era, an era of the creation of an America mindful of primarily national issues. After 1937 however, Johnson fundamentally altered the way he conducted politics for the rest of his life. What Johnson strove to do was turn local into national. Fundamentally, Johnson sought to make the problems of the West the problems of the nation.

⁹⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Radio Address Over WOAI, Brenham, TX, 2 April 1937," Speech Files, 1937, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1937.

In 1937, Johnson's support came from the land where he was born: the Texas Hill Country, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, the rest of West Texas.⁹⁵ Johnson must have been pleased by this victory, but he also recognized that it was not a personal victory in support of his own policies or western policies; rather, it was a victory for the policies of President Roosevelt. However, Johnson also recognized he was situated in a position where he could work to develop a new national strategy—a strategy to make problems of the West problems of the nation. This was the strategy that would become beneficial to Johnson in his manipulation of western and cowboy mythology. To solve problems facing the West, Americans needed a cowboy.

Johnson, from Texas as he was, had a decision to make. He could present himself as a southerner and vote with southern congressmen, or he could ally himself with the growing western voting bloc in Congress. As a congressman, Johnson fought for his constituents, and his efforts were focused primarily on problems that were traditionally considered western, most particularly the issues of water and power lines: “the story of Lyndon Johnson is the story of the electric wires...which linked the life of the West, as railroad has linked its commerce, to the rest of America—for it was Lyndon Johnson who brought those wires to the Hill Country.”⁹⁶ Additionally, Johnson differed from his southern counterparts on the issue of race. While it cannot be said Johnson was progressive on issues of race, it is noteworthy that “as long as [Johnson] could not be seem helping blacks...he helped them.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 437.

⁹⁶ Caro, *The Path to Power*, xviii.

⁹⁷ Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate*. (New York: WW Norton & Company: 1982), 216.

Johnson became more closely tied than ever to the presidency of Roosevelt upon the backdrop of one of the greatest political feuds of the era: that of Roosevelt and his Vice-President, John Nance Garner. In 1939, Garner disapproved of Roosevelt's desire to run for a third-term, and of his expansive government. The conflict intensified when Roosevelt attempted to expand the size of the Supreme Court. Roosevelt's appointments to the enlarged court could have prevented the blocking of New Deal legislation.⁹⁸ Roosevelt needed an ally powerful in Texas. A logical first choice might have been Johnson's mentor, Sam Rayburn. But Rayburn, out of longstanding loyalty to Garner, would not support the President.⁹⁹ Johnson ultimately ingratiated himself to the President by becoming something of a spy in the delegation of Texas congressmen.

In Texas, Lyndon Johnson's brand of liberalism, which supported the relief and recovery programs of the New Deal, had not completely disappeared in the 1930s. Most Texas congressman still supported rural electrification, conservation, and tax relief for lower classes.¹⁰⁰ Labor laws that came with the New Deal were frequently unopposed, because they had little impact on the lives of rural Texans. In 1941, Johnson could afford to run as a liberal Democrat because full blown conservatism—and the demands from oil, gas, and other corporate interests that came with it—had not yet completely overtaken

⁹⁸ Garner, when he read this bill aloud, reacted by "striding from the rostrum, holding his nose, making the thumbs down gesture of the Roman arena." George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, CN, 1979), 15.

⁹⁹ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 570.

¹⁰⁰ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 15.

Texas.¹⁰¹ It is important to consider, however, that Texas possessed a relatively stable economy, which aided to the conservative branch of the Democrats' ascent to power in the state. Less Texans were vulnerable and required the aid that New Deal programs offered.

Johnson was "Roosevelt's man in Texas—but he was not only Roosevelt's man."¹⁰² Perhaps if Johnson had recognized this fact, his failed senatorial campaign in 1941 to fill the seat of the deceased Senator Sheppard would not have been unsuccessful. Though Johnson may have had a growing network of support in Texas, this network of support was not enough to help him win an election against a formidable opponent, one whose successful campaign and recognition of the value of western mythology and Texas folklore would help to solidify Johnson's own national strategies: W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel.

Johnson recognized his best strategy going into this race was to do what he had done to be elected to the House: to tie himself as closely as possible to President Roosevelt, who remained very popular in Texas.¹⁰³ As he entered the 1941 election, Johnson faced significant disadvantages. There were several candidates in the running for the seat who had name-recognition throughout Texas. However, Johnson knew if he tied himself to the President, he could quickly establish a name and viable platform.

¹⁰¹ In 1941, Texas still regarded natural gas as "hardly more than a waste product." The state's main livelihood still came from "crops, livestock products, minerals, and other raw material." Average Texans still saw value in federal aid programs that could help them and were not yet silenced by their state government's monetary interests. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 17.

¹⁰² Caro, *The Path to Power*, 599.

¹⁰³ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 676.

Johnson announced his candidacy for Senate on the steps of the White House.¹⁰⁴ The most important thing to take from Johnson's strategy in 1941 is that "in 1941, as in 1937...the Johnson campaign consisted of a single issue: 'Roosevelt, Roosevelt, Roosevelt.'" ¹⁰⁵ Johnson gave speeches espousing his deep connection to Roosevelt, and used as billboard a photo of he and Roosevelt shaking hands. Roosevelt himself played an active role in the race, volunteering Harold Young, his Vice-President's aid, to Johnson's campaign. Additionally, Johnson was not lacking in money, money which primarily came from contracting and engineering firm, Brown & Root, who had worked with and for Johnson in his years as congressman. Brown & Root won the contract to build many of the power lines that electrified the Hill Country.¹⁰⁶ Johnson was the reason that Brown & Root had their contract, and they were understandably grateful. Though Brown & Root could not legally contribute to the campaign, ultimately, they expressed their approval of Congressman Johnson through the gift of hundreds of thousands of dollars.¹⁰⁷

Johnson struck a confident figure compared to the man who had run for office in 1937. He was more polished a candidate, wore "a fedora instead of a Stetson," and generally, attempted to look like he belonged in the Senate.¹⁰⁸ Here was a Johnson who did not attempt to appeal to any western base of support. He didn't mention river

¹⁰⁴ In fact, Johnson said he would run "under the banner of Roosevelt." Roosevelt, when asked, said Lyndon Johnson was "a very old friend of [his]." Caro, *The Path to Power*, 677.

¹⁰⁵ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 677.

¹⁰⁶ Paul C. Conkin, *Big Daddy From the Pedernales*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers: 1986), 95.

¹⁰⁷ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 692.

projects, rural electrification, or agricultural issues outside of their relationship to the New Deal. Instead, Johnson focused on letting his New Deal votes speak for him. Johnson supported public power, work relief, conservation, and agricultural price supports.¹⁰⁹ Because his Roosevelt strategy worked for him in 1937, Johnson did not yet recognize the need for a new strategy, nor the value of a more folksy approach. The entrance into the race of Pappy O'Daniel, then Governor of Texas, changed everything.

Pappy O'Daniel was not a Texan by birth. Born in Ohio, O'Daniel spent much of his early life in Kansas. Before his run for Governor in 1938, O'Daniel was a flour salesman and radio personality. O'Daniel began writing jingles for the radio to sell his flour, and eventually began writing songs that were not to sell flour, but were to honor Texas, Texans, and the heroes of Texas: cowboys.¹¹⁰

In 1938, most Texans still lived on farms, and even those farm boys who had recently arrived in the state's fast-growing cities were still farm boys, whose customs, tastes, vocabulary, and view of life were those of country people. This view was simplistic, homespun, and very, very firm.¹¹¹

In addition to hillbilly songs, on his radio show O'Daniel gave religious talks, lectured listeners on morality, and recounted tall tales of Texan heroics.¹¹² O'Daniel's fans began writing letters to him, begging him to run for Governor. Eventually, there were so many requests that he asked people—in a broadcast on Palm Sunday, no less—to write to him if they believed he would make a good Governor for Texas. O'Daniel received “messages

¹⁰⁹ Schwarz, *The New Dealers*, 271.

¹¹⁰ A few notable titles of O'Daniel's songs, as enumerated in Caro: *Beautiful*, *Beautiful Texas*, *Sons of the Alamo*, and *The Lay of the Lonely Longhorn*. Caro, *The Path to Power*, 696.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 23.

from over fifty-four thousand people asking him to run, four advising him not to run.”¹¹³

O’Daniel announced his candidacy for Governor of Texas in May 1938.

By late June, it was apparent that O’Daniel’s political aspirations, which the media assumed were ridiculous dreams, were not quite so far-fetched because of the power of his populist message. O’Daniel successfully presented himself as an average person who just happened to be concerned about the lives of other average people. He recognized something powerful in the electorate that everyone else missed.

Accompanied by “his hillbilly band and the scripture,” he drew larger, more enthusiastic crowds than any other candidate running for election.¹¹⁴ The *New York Times* recorded a conversation O’Daniel had with a man at a Fort Worth Rally. The man called him “a Yankee carpetbagger from Ohio.” O’Daniel responded that he “came to Texas fifteen years ago,” and emphasized that he came because “[he] wanted to be here, [he] wanted to be one of you common folk.”¹¹⁵

O’Daniel presented himself as one of the people, even though he was not, and the populist message mingled with religion resonated with voters¹¹⁶ O’Daniel made clear, through his interactions with people, that he was “tired of politicians,” and added that

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 24.

¹¹⁵ “A Hillbilly Flour Salesman,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1938.

¹¹⁶ By the time of his campaign, O’Daniel was a very wealthy man. O’Daniel himself often viewed his campaign as a great way to drum up publicity for his flour. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 26.

“[he was] not one of them.”¹¹⁷ O’Daniel received a majority of the votes cast in the election, eliminating the need for a runoff.¹¹⁸

Here, is perhaps the idea most fundamental to Johnson’s necessary shift in strategy. Ultimately, O’Daniel prevailed in the 1941 election because he understood the folk culture and long history associated with the frontier, Texas, and its people. He understood the hold that mythic concepts, regardless of truth, had over the people of Texas. This is something that everyone else missed. Arguably, O’Daniel created the first true mythic campaign in American politics. O’Daniel represented the consummate Washington outsider, Johnson the insider. The outsider had an important lesson to teach. Lyndon Johnson learned this lesson, and took this strategy to a national level. It is important to understand, however, that Pappy O’Daniel did it first, and that Pappy O’Daniel outmaneuvered even the cunning Lyndon Johnson in Texas. O’Daniel was underestimated by everyone, and he still won.

O’Daniel found strength in the farmers of Texas. He used a fatherly voice and religious undertones to maintain his wide appeal. O’Daniel presented himself as a true Texan, above politics, and just one of the “common citizens.”¹¹⁹ These sorts of appeals sound strikingly like the appeals Johnson would use in later campaigns, not at all similar to the Lyndon Johnson present in the 1941 senatorial election.

Before O’Daniel entered the race, Johnson was all business: buttoned-up suits and fancy neckties. After he realized the source of O’Daniel’s popularity, however, Johnson

¹¹⁷ “A Hillbilly Flour Salesman,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1938.

¹¹⁸ In Texas, this was nearly unheard of. O’Daniel’s vote count was 573,000. His closest competitor won only 231,000 votes. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 25.

¹¹⁹ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 701.

changed tactic. Johnson tried, unsuccessfully to become more like Pappy O'Daniel.

Gone were the days of espousing the policies of Roosevelt and Roosevelt only.:

...the dark suits of had been replaced by Texas white; the jackets of the suits hung open, or were taken off, exposing sweat-stained, rumpled shirts; his neckties were the ties of the Hill Country again, not of Capitol Hill...the unfashionably short mail-order neckwear of the countryman; their knots, loosened in the heat of campaigning, dangled from an open, sweat-wilted collar.¹²⁰

After O'Daniel, Lyndon simultaneously became an advocate for farmers, drew upon his "country boy" roots, and attempted to maintain support for President Roosevelt and the New Deal. Through populist appeals, he tried to remind the people of the Tenth District that he was one of them: a country boy from simple roots. He wanted them to know that he understood the importance of farmers and ranchers. He tried to relate to them in the way the O'Daniel so successfully related to them in his campaign for Governor. At the same time, he remained conscious of the national mood of the country. He never completely dropped the message that he stood behind Roosevelt, and that was the driving force of his campaign. At once, he encouraged farmers and ranchers to democracy, and rallied them around a national figure, President Roosevelt.

In my country-boy way of thinking, there is nothing so democratic in the whole world as a meeting like this, where our farm and ranch and town people are gathered together...to show America and the whole world that you are one hundred percent behind Roosevelt and unity and Lyndon Johnson.¹²¹

In his radio addresses from June, the very month O'Daniel's support began to swell, Johnson began to us western and farm-related talking points with increasing

¹²⁰ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 709.

¹²¹ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Radio Address by Lyndon Johnson, Amarillo, TX, 23 June 1941," Speech Files, 1941, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1941.

frequency, abandoning a strategy that focused solely on solidarity with Roosevelt and the New Deal.¹²² Johnson enumerated the problems of the west, and showed personal concern with the problems of his constituents, something he did not do in the election he won in 1937. He empathized with the real, daily life problems of his would-be constituents. Johnson knew of the significance soil, water, rural electrification, and livestock had with these people. So he borrowed from O'Daniel's tactics and began to use western populism

We don't talk jobs and labor problems and rural electrification, and flood control, soil conservation, farm interest rates, and sheep, goats, cattle, and hogs, like something that exists somewhere else, because all those things are daily bread for us and when something goes wrong with them we don't eat.¹²³

In the same radio address, and in several others delivered later that week, Johnson implored voters not to "vote for hillbilly music," but instead, to "vote for the man whose record shows you he'll do the most for you."¹²⁴ This was a direct attack against O'Daniel and his folksy approach. Clearly, if Johnson felt it necessary to attack O'Daniel on style, he understood the value of this style. At this stage, however, Johnson's primary concern remained full support of Roosevelt and the national agenda of the day.

Johnson's last address, delivered immediately before election night, is notable in that it both pays thanks to mythic western figures, and ends with its emphasis on Roosevelt. Johnson argued that farmers and ranchers, figures of mythic importance, were on his side, and not O'Daniel's in the campaign. He goes on to say that these men have

¹²² Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 34.

¹²³ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Radio Address by Lyndon Johnson, Waco, TX, 20 June 1941," Speech Files, 1941, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1941.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

set an example for all of America. He made the appeal that these men, their code of ethics, their standards of living, their ideas of what is right in politics, are ideas that the nation at large should adopt. Johnson took western symbols and tried to make them symbols of national significance. Importantly, however, Johnson ended this campaign with an appeal to national unity and Roosevelt noticeably tacked on to the end of his speech. This is a reflection of Johnson's discomfort with completely abandoning a platform he *knew* was national, a platform he was certain of the country's faith in.

Tonight I humbly thank the farmers and ranchers who, recognizing the peril we face, have worked day and night in this campaign. I thank the laboring men of Texas...They have set a standard for all America to copy. They believe in Roosevelt and unity and Lyndon Johnson."

Johnson lost the election by a margin of only 1,311, almost certainly stolen votes.^{125 126} The election represented a crucial shift in strategy for Johnson. For the first time, Johnson recognized that Pappy's western persona, his appeals to farmers, cowboys, and the working people of Texas, meant more than his own promises to stand behind Roosevelt. In the end, it proved more important to talk about how you were one of the people than to talk about what you could do for them. Johnson recognized the connection between these appeals, myth, and the populist ideals he had internalized his entire life. The national mood was not static, and currently, the national mood was changing. Heads were turning westward. In this election, Johnson saw the importance and potential national resonance of local politics. Pappy O'Daniel won a senatorial campaign with

¹²⁵ Caro, *The Path to Power*, 740.

¹²⁶ Unluckily for Johnson, O'Daniel's supporters were of the particularly fervent variety and "stole the election for him." Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 105.

local politics. Perhaps, if used properly, there would be no limit to what local politics, and particularly western politics, could achieve in Johnson's capable hands.

Chapter Four:
1941-1947:
Politics, Patriotism, and the Solidification of a National Image

Lyndon Johnson did not accept defeat easily. He later recalled the months after his defeat at the hands of folksy Pappy O'Daniel as "the most miserable in [his] life. [He] began to think about leaving politics and going home to make money."¹²⁷ Of course, Johnson was prone to exaggeration, so we may never know if this was a real feeling of discouragement or simply a story designed to add to the mythology of a cowboy who overcame terrible obstacles. What we do know, however, is how Johnson responded to defeat. Recovering quickly, he made decisive changes to create a new image in national politics. In 1941, Johnson discovered Franklin Roosevelt's blessing was no longer enough to win in Texas. He also found, however, that cowboy and western mythology, the symbols he was raised with and the values that were born in him, could be used to great effect in Texas. It was during this period that Johnson began to consciously and successfully manipulate symbols and values of the frontier, ideas he had internalized his entire life. Johnson emphasized more strongly than ever before the important role that the frontier myth of community and cooperation could play in politics.

Lyndon Johnson was Franklin Roosevelt's man through and through—until association with Roosevelt became politically disadvantageous. Johnson's loyalty to Roosevelt in his 1937 and 1941 campaigns cannot be overemphasized; Roosevelt's New Deal platform was the *only* platform with which Johnson was concerned. In 1937, this strategy was incredibly effective because the New Deal was overwhelmingly popular in

¹²⁷ Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, (New York: Oxford University Press: 1991), 225.

Texas. It is important to note, however, that by 1941, there were significant opponents of the New Deal in Texas. As early as July 1941, anti-Roosevelt Democrats formulated plans to defeat New Dealers in 1944.¹²⁸ Deep divisions in the Texas Democratic Party based largely on negative response to New Deal economic philosophy that involved heavy federal spending, led to a fear among Roosevelt supporters that Texas would be decisive in preventing President Roosevelt's fourth term.¹²⁹

O'Daniel succeeded in 1941 by tapping into this sentiment. But he was also able to anticipate the mood of Texans and tap into their own myths to reach them. O'Daniel realized something that even Johnson did not—the significance of making Texans feel not only that a politician should work for them, but also that he himself was one of them. Crucial to this concept was Texas folk-culture, and in this area, O'Daniel was a master. Johnson needed to learn to adapt.

In 1942, Johnson, no longer discouraged, was in good shape to face O'Daniel again, this time in the Democratic primary for O'Daniel's full six-year term. Johnson's plans, however, were derailed by Pearl Harbor. At the outbreak of war, Johnson pledged to serve, which made running in the 1942 primary an impossibility. He would wait until 1948 for his next chance at the Senate. This six-year gap gave Johnson an important chance to cultivate his populist and cowboy image through his politics in Congress.

In the summer of 1942, Johnson took an approved leave of absence from his House seat and entered the Navy to work on "production and manpower problems" that

¹²⁸ George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, CN, 1979), 45.

¹²⁹ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 48.

were slowing the nation's output of planes and ships.¹³⁰ Johnson was assigned to the Under Secretary's office and took responsibility for production of military vehicles on the West and Southwest.¹³¹ We see strains of frontier mythology in Johnson's sense of duty to the President in his task, for he believed that if he only had the authority, he had a working solution to the problem, which involved group effort and cooperation. This group effort and cooperation is precisely what we mean when we speak of the feminized, agrarian version of frontier myth. Johnson brought his belief in this myth to his work in the Navy.

Johnson's boredom led him to a decision to seek a larger, more personally meaningful role in the war that had derailed his political prospects. With wife Lady Bird supervising his Washington office, Johnson won an uncontested victory in the Democratic primary for his House seat and was sent, by direct order of President Roosevelt, to the Southwest Pacific front.¹³² Through his service, Johnson got a taste of combat that tested his cowboy mettle and gave him a new story to add to the personal mythology he aimed to cultivate. This story emphasized the depth of his commitment to the most important community he was a member of—The United States of America.

Even in his military career, internalized aspects of the frontier myth were clearly evident in Johnson's behavior and opinions about particular policies. Through his experiences in the military, Johnson had the opportunity to rub shoulders with incredibly powerful men, including General Douglas MacArthur. Johnson became a major advocate

¹³⁰ This approved leave allowed Johnson to keep his seat in the House of Representatives. He did not vote during his time in the military. Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 231.

¹³¹ More specifically, in California and Texas. Ibid.

¹³² Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 236.

of MacArthur's military strategies, including the idea that the Southwest Pacific needed more men and supplies.¹³³ In short, Lyndon the cowboy sought to bring civilization to a place where there was little, evoking the feminized version of the frontier myth.

However, simultaneously Johnson expressed the masculinized version of the myth, where "savages" were not entitled to natural rights belonging to "people," but America could and should do its part to help to civilize these savages using whatever means necessary.¹³⁴

Perhaps the most notable story from Johnson's days at war was his participation in an air raid that earned him a Silver Star. Johnson and two Army officers went to the 22nd Bomb Group base, which was assigned the high risk mission of bombing the Japanese airbase at Lae in New Guinea. A colonel took Johnson's original seat on one bomber, and it was shot down with no survivors. Reports vary on what happened to the B-26 Marauder carrying Johnson. Johnson recalled the B-26 was also attacked by Japanese fighters but survived, while others, including other members of the flight crew, claim it turned back because of generator trouble before reaching the objective and before encountering enemy aircraft, a perspective which is supported by official flight records. Other airplanes that continued to the target did come under fire near the target at about the same time that Johnson's plane was recorded as having landed back at the original airbase.¹³⁵

¹³³ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*. (New York: Knopf: 1990), 61.

¹³⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 1998), 109.

¹³⁵ Jaime McIntyre, "The Story Behind LBJ's Silver Star," CNN, June 13, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/johnson.silver.star/story/> (accessed March 7, 2012).

Johnson was the only one of the participants of his air raid of similar rank and experience that received a medal for the mission. He felt deeply self-conscious about receiving the medal.¹³⁶ Some thought that Johnson might refuse the medal, as it was fairly straightforwardly undeserved by the typical standards of a Silver Star.¹³⁷ If we know one thing that is deeply embedded in Johnson, however, it is his desire to play the hero. The honor of the Silver Star and the credibility it could add to the growing cowboy mythology he sought to surround himself with was temptation too compelling to overcome. So the Silver Star became part of the tale, a largely exaggerated and mostly untrue part of the tale, but an important part of the mythos nonetheless.¹³⁸

When Johnson returned to his House seat late in 1942, he recognized a shift in public opinion in Texas, a shift against President Roosevelt that could have potentially disastrous consequences to his own political future. In Texas, this shift was most fundamentally a growing resentment from farmers directed at rationing and bureaucratic red tape, clear symbols of a Federal government grown increasingly large at the hands of Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Johnson, concerned with his image, moved to align himself with this new, more conservative Texas opinion. In a speech in December of 1942, Johnson criticized the

¹³⁶ In a letter to friend Tommy Corcoran that he wrote but never sent, Johnson said of the medal: "My very brief service with these men and its experience of what they do and sacrifice makes me all the more sensitive that I should not accept a citation of recognition for the little part I played for a short time in learning and facing with them the problems they encounter all the time." Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 241.

¹³⁷ Indeed, most suspect some "political backscratching" on the part of General MacArthur, for in Lyndon, he had made a powerful new ally in Congress who had access (albeit limited) to the President and the press. Johnson could be a powerful advocate of MacArthur's military tactics, having lived through and supported them. Additionally, friend Harold Ickles was left with the impression from Johnson himself that he had declined the medal. Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 240-241.

¹³⁸ One journalist later wrote, "Johnson's medal was one of the least deserved but most often displayed Silver Star in American military history. Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 120.

bureaucracy and Roosevelt at once. The speech was both a direct appeal to the people of the 10th Congressional District of Texas and a pointed criticism of the Federal government as run by President Roosevelt. Johnson condemned Roosevelt's "over-stuffed" government and identified several New Deal Programs worthy of criticism by name: the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and the Works Project Administration (WPA). This was a specific and pointed critique of policies that just one year earlier received complete support and made up the entirety of Johnson's platform against Pappy O'Daniel.

...What about over-staffed, over-stuffed government that worried along like a centipede—too good in the production of limbs and not good enough in the production of arms...What about the rationing that has gone irrational, about administrators who spend too much time laying down law to us and not enough time reading up on the law? ...With our shoulders to the wheel of war against foreign enslavement, those old domestic pieces, the PWA, the FHA, and WPA are now in the way...The social gain that we are very busy preserving at this moment is our status as free men in a free nation.¹³⁹

Additionally, in this particular speech, Johnson spoke directly to the concerns of the people when he mentioned rationing gone irrational. He criticized lawmakers and government officials so concerned with exercising and over-stepping their own authority as to become blind to the concerns of real people. In this criticism, Johnson sent a clear message to his constituents, a message that he was not like these men. His criticisms emphasized that he was one of the average people and shared their concerns. This idea of establishing a connectivity and closeness— a sense of oneness with constituents and a

¹³⁹ Ibid.

recognition of the appeal of populism— was a lesson that Johnson learned loud and clear in 1941 from Pappy O'Daniel.

When delivered, the speech received considerable press and firmly reestablished Johnson in a favorable light in Texas politics. It became something of a blueprint for what became common themes of Johnson's public statements in 1943.¹⁴⁰ At the start of the year, Johnson launched a campaign to use American manpower more efficiently in the war effort. Johnson supported the same view that most Americans and Texans also supported—that labor unions were actively and selfishly hindering war production so that full potential was not reached. At first, this idea does not seem to evoke any strain of cowboy mythology. In fact, however, this idea is complimentary to the frontier myth of cooperation. Here, Johnson displayed his belief in the cooperation of all Americans, labor unions and corporations included, to reach a common goal.

In the war efforts of 1943, Johnson, from his position in Congress, advocated for a more regimented, controlled, cooperative, and effective use of manpower. Johnson, concerned by a *Time* magazine report that absenteeism at American factories was seriously hindering the country's ability to produce war vehicles and ammunition, offered an amendment to a Navy Department Bill requiring shipyards to file quarterly reports on absenteeism statistics. This amendment worked to ensure American workers felt duty to their place of employment and to America's war efforts. It placed emphasis on the idea

¹⁴⁰ Johnson's speeches of this era had several common themes: "to promote a more effective war effort at home; to identify [Johnson] with the country's more conservative wartime temper; to advance long-term liberal domestic and foreign policies which he believed would hold center stage in postwar affairs; and to win a position of greater authority in the government as a prelude to a U.S. Senate seat." Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 254.

that we, as American citizens, should hold one another accountable for successes and failures alike.

Though Johnson's absenteeism bill was shelved, it lead directly to his appointment to chair a Naval Affairs subcommittee whose aim was to investigate whether person in the Naval Department were "pursuing the war effort efficiently, expeditiously, and economically."¹⁴¹ Here we see, again, Johnson's desire to encourage community-oriented success and to hold people accountable for communal failures.

In 1943 and 1944, Johnson walked a tightrope—supporting the Roosevelt administration's war efforts and criticizing their New Deal and big government policies at once. This move reflected Johnson's recognition of the importance of the Texas conservatives in his district. Johnson feared such divisions and did not like to be linked to either side. Publicly, Johnson shunned his label as a liberal Democrat. However, Johnson recognized the importance of countrywide cooperation in war efforts and remained loyal to welfare programs and economic regulations that helped those struggling in a post-war economy. Also important to note are Johnson's economic appeals to his constituents. In January 1944, Johnson told the Texas Legislature:

[Roosevelt is] for free enterprise. I'm for local self-government. [He's] against centralizing power in Washington...but then [he] thought about free enterprise and about concentrating powers of government in Washington and about local self-government. And [he] reached this conclusion: [he wants] to substitute for free enterprise equal opportunity. Every man who has gone through a living Hell for you and for me, and comes out with scars on his body and his soul to show for it shall have an equal opportunity to get a job when this is over.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 256.

¹⁴² Lyndon B. Johnson. "Johnson's speech to Texas Legislature, Austin, TX, 12/44," Speech Files, 1944, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1944.

Johnson evoked the feminized frontier myth when he said he would “leave it to the local community to assume this responsibility,” but also said that if the community failed to act on this, that he would vote for legislation to make this possible.¹⁴³

At the beginning his speech, Johnson lent support to “local self-government,” not necessarily an ideal one associates with liberalism, but certainly one we associate with the frontier. Johnson offered approval towards groups of citizens who brought order to their own place, as opposed to Roosevelt’s large scheme of government, which forced its order on every town. While not a complete and total rejection of Roosevelt’s policies, this showed Johnson’s strong desire to create a connection with the people in his district, an emphasis on populism he learned from O’Daniel. Johnson emphasized the connection of all people to their place, and their responsibility for bringing government and order to that place. He also worked to explain the importance of community recognition of heroism and patriotism.

Though Johnson did support many of the Roosevelt Administration’s wartime policies through 1944, it is important to understand why.¹⁴⁴ Whereas in the past, Johnson’s support of Roosevelt’s policies was blind and aimed at the creation of a popular national identity, by 1944 a shift occurred. Johnson felt a real sense of duty

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Dallek, Caro, and Dugger all contend that Johnson’s focus on supporting the wartime policies of the Roosevelt administration was entirely to do with the fact that this move was incredibly politically popular. While this is certainly a valid interpretation of Johnson’s actions, these historians all fail to acknowledge the power of the myth Johnson spent thirty years internalizing—that with a community-minded spirit, the wild frontier could be conquered—and the significance it may have held in determining Johnson’s actions and the policies he supported.

towards the war effort, a sense of duty that harkened back to the ideas and myths about the frontier that surrounded him as he came to an age of political maturity.

Due to his belief in the power of community, Johnson was willing go against big Texas interests. Johnson remained strongly opposed to wartime profiteering, even where oil was concerned. Oil was king in Texas, but in a situation where Johnson stood to make a great deal of money, he was more concerned with preserving the interests and integrity of the nation as a whole. In short, he was interested in working as a community for the benefit of that community. A committee Johnson chaired in June of 1944 voted that all naval oil reserves should be in strict service to the American Fleet. Again, in July 1944, Johnson voted against the interests of big oil and with the interests of the country at large, against a thirty-five cent increase in the price of crude oil.¹⁴⁵

Political insiders in Texas feared this approach would not be advantageous to Johnson's political prospects. Tom Miller, Mayor of Austin in 1944, wanted Johnson to denounce oil rationing. Instead, Johnson gave a speech denouncing people like Miller, the people in Texas who "...would withhold petroleum from our armed forces to use it at home."¹⁴⁶ Johnson rejected the special interests of Texas in favor of evoking strains of Texas mythology: the belief that by working together, a community could overcome even the most seeming insurmountable of opponents, in this case, a terrible war overseas.

Johnson felt comfortable about his political prospects in 1944 because the majority of party leaders in Texas still supported Roosevelt and his New Deal policies.

¹⁴⁵ Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate*. (New York: WW Norton & Company: 1982), 269.

¹⁴⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Radio Address by Lyndon Johnson, Austin TX, 23 July 1944," Speech Files, 1944, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1944.

However, there was a growing movement of so-called “Regulars,” the conservative face of the Democratic party in Texas, who sought to take back control of the party. Led by Commerce Secretary Jesse Jones, Senator Pappy O’Daniel, and hundreds of powerful oilmen, the Regulars appealed to the concerns of an average Texan: heavy governmental control and rationing of commodities essential to the success of Texas. The Regulars wanted the state Democratic convention to select independent presidential electors for the Democratic column on the ballot who would decline to cast their electoral votes for Roosevelt in an effort to throw the election into the House of Representatives, where the South (and anti- New Deal sentiment) would have the numerical advantage.¹⁴⁷ The plan failed, but Texas Regulars remained an organized group who advocated for “restoration of states’ rights and white supremacy.”¹⁴⁸ The Regulars vehemently opposed labor unions and the New Deal. Ultimately, after Roosevelt’s reelection, the liberal faction of the party prevailed.

In 1945, Johnson’s political fortunes remained inextricably linked to the presence of President Franklin Roosevelt in the White House. Though his platform was no longer one of blind support for Roosevelt’s platform and New Deal policies, Johnson was still seen, at least in Texas where it mattered most, as Roosevelt’s man. At Roosevelt’s passing, in April of that year, Johnson felt a profound sense of grief. But Roosevelt’s death influenced the development of Johnson’s policies and belief system. Now fully free to move away from support of the President, Johnson focused on development his

¹⁴⁷ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ George N. Green, "Texas Regulars," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/afc03>, accessed March 05, 2012.

own national identity. Roosevelt's passing, while a deep loss for all Americans, did not mean the end of his ideas and programs. Johnson came of political age during the New Deal era and as such, became a bearer of the New Deal legacy. Now, Johnson was free to mold these New Deal ideas about the power of helping and the power of community to his Texas and frontier ideals.

The period between Roosevelt's death and Johnson's next run at the Senate can be summed in a single word: uncertainty. Johnson lost a man central to the crafting of his political identity. He felt unsure of where to go next. In this period of confusion, more than ever, Johnson fell back on images he had so deeply internalized his entire life, both consciously and unconsciously. He fell back upon the frontier myths of cooperation and opportunity for all.

Johnson, in this post-war, post-Roosevelt era, voted using his frontier sensibilities. Johnson espoused government activism on behalf of the disadvantaged. He voted to support members of his community that had sacrificed. Johnson spoke and voted for bills aimed to help veterans of the war. He supported President Truman's bill for maximum employment of combat veterans and voted for legislation aimed to alleviate housing shortages due to the moratorium on new home building that occurred during the war. He voted to continue price control laws to prevent the reoccurrence of the cycle of economic distress that happened post-World War

Johnson's opponent in the 1946 Congressional election was Hardy Hollers, a Texas Regular and decorated Army veteran who placed heavy emphasis on his war

record. Hollers also emphasized the issue of “honesty in government.”¹⁴⁹ He alleged Johnson had people all over Texas—administrators, oilmen, even postmasters—in his pocket working for him. Certainly some of Hollers’ accusations were justified, but they are just one piece of the puzzle. More relevant to our analysis, however, is how Johnson reacted. Johnson responded to Hollers’ accusations by fully transforming his political image, once and for all, into a cowboy, both in rhetoric and appearance. Johnson showed that he was one of the common people, a Texas man just like the Texas men and women he represented.

Johnson’s campaign took him to each of the ten counties of his district. Before he spoke, a four piece band, aptly named “Johnson’s Hill Billy Boys,” drove around town encouraging people to come hear Lyndon speak.¹⁵⁰ Even before people heard him speak, this band all but guaranteed that they would have the cowboy myth at mind when thinking of Lyndon Johnson. At some appearances, actor Gene Autry appeared, sang the song “I’m Back in the Saddle Again,” and urged voters to put Lyndon back in the saddle, where he belonged.¹⁵¹

Johnson’s western, cowboy persona also shined through in his rhetoric. Johnson used pure, tough-talking, American cowboy language and said he would fight anyone off who tried to take away freedom. The image evoked is not necessarily an image of violence; rather, it is an image of being willing to stand for a place and to not allow

¹⁴⁹ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 280.

¹⁵⁰ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 285.

¹⁵¹ Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 201.

unlawful forces to rip that place from the hands of those who have ownership of that place.

That's one of the many good things about us Americans. There's not ever anybody going to take away our American privilege of blowing off steam. We'll fight 'em before we'd stand for that. And we'd whip 'em. Just like we always have.¹⁵²

Johnson didn't just talk in rough and tumble generalities about place and the defense of place. He also evoked images of a particular place: the Hill Country of Texas. Johnson spoke of a special, western, and frontier-like place specifically. He placed this geographic location at the top, and implied that this place was the very embodiment of what it meant to be American. Johnson used pure and natural imagery. He implied that this part of Texas represented something special, and that the people that lived there had something important to do and say. He linked the image of natural purity to something that was positive about this place.

You know, it's always a great thrill to come back to Johnson City and the Hill Country. There isn't any question about it: up in the hills, the sun shines brighter...the air is fresher...and the clouds are less troubled that anywhere I know of.¹⁵³

Johnson also moved to criticize the Texas Regulars and make *them* appear to be the ones distanced from the people of the Tenth District. Johnson diminished the power of the Texas Regulars by labeling them mere "clique." Johnson used a guilt trip evocative of the frontier, calling out these men for selling out to their community and

¹⁵² Lyndon B. Johnson. "Bastrop Speech 4/26/46," Speech Files, 1946, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1946.

¹⁵³ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Address of Congressman Lyndon Johnson to Graduates of Johnson City High School, Johnson City, TX," Speech Files, 1946, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1946.

their neighbors. In Johnson's frontier mindset, these men represented the opposite of what it meant to be a strong leader. These were the men that brought ruin to communities because crucially, Johnson believed that the power of community spirit could bring people together to work to achieve a common goal. Additionally, Johnson distanced himself from big oil and big industry. In doing so, at once he made himself resemble a common man and attempted to rally others around him to work together, without the help of these traitorous men and businesses.

Now on the receiving end of that order from Big Oil, there is a clique of men here in the Tenth District of Texas, men who have sold out their community, their neighbors, and themselves. I think you will understand me when I speak of that clique of men that get their orders from Big Oil, I think you will know what I mean when I call them Little Grease. Big oil...is too big for our district...it is even too big for our state.¹⁵⁴

Johnson also used rhetoric to establish the Tenth District as a place of *literal* mythic significance. Through his words, it seemed as if this district was the place of origin for the myth itself.

Men came to these 10 counties from nearly every nation on the earth's face. Their grandfathers settles in Johnson City when the Indians were still there.¹⁵⁵

Johnson took listeners through his district's history, back to the glory days when the frontier was still open and the men were still bravely facing the Indians and making

¹⁵⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Address by LBJ at the Opening of his Campaign for Reelection to the US Congress, Austin, TX," Speech Files, 1946, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1946.

¹⁵⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson. "Johnson's speech at Brenham, TX 7/12/46," Speech Files, 1946, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1946.

cowboys of themselves. He established the district as a place of great importance, and invoked in those listening, a sense of history and a sense of place.

They were the people who met in Noah Byer's blacksmith shop and wrote the Texas Declaration of Independence. They wrote it not because they believed men must have war, but because they believed men must have peace.¹⁵⁶

Listeners had a sense of a place with hundreds of years of history. Additionally, and interestingly, Johnson rejected the frontier myth of violence. He emphasized the peacefulness of these original settlers of Texas. He emphasized the fact that they brought peace and *not* war to this place. He appealed to the community-oriented strain of the frontier myth.

And everywhere I have gone, I found the same kind of folks who live in Central Texas. Men who want no more than a job, the right to worship as they please, the right to have schools for their children, and churches and homes.¹⁵⁷

Johnson concluded by reminding the people of his district of who they are, most fundamentally, as a population. They are people who just want peace. They are people who just want the very basic elements of civilization. Johnson also said that these are the people he found everywhere. This is important, for this is where Johnson attempted to make the move from Texas politics to national politics. Johnson emphasized that the values of Texas, the fundamental values of the people of the Tenth District of Texas, were the fundamental values of the nation as a whole. Johnson called values of his community-oriented strain of frontier mythology values of the nation as a whole. In this

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

campaign, and through this rhetoric in particular, we see the first inklings of Johnson's recognition of the national power held by in frontier mythology.

On July 27, 1946, Johnson won a decisive victory in his battle against Hollers.¹⁵⁸ However, just as Johnson recognized the power of the frontier mythology he used in his campaign, he also recognized that New Deal fervor was losing hold around the nation, and especially in Texas. Truman's low levels of popular support and the Republicans' gains in the House and Senate in 1946 marked a sea change in American politics forced a shift in political ideology and campaign strategy that defined the remainder of Johnson's political career.

¹⁵⁸ Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 110.

Chapter Five:
1948 Battle on the Frontier & Beyond:
Solidification of National Identity Through Dissemination of Myth

Of Johnson's time in the Senate, fellow Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois said, "first of all, physically, Lyndon Johnson is a very impressive person...when you heard him on the floor, you thought of him in terms of somebody who had real stature."¹⁵⁹ Katharine Graham, personal friend of Johnson, said he "just got things done," and added that it was "his Texas personality that did it."¹⁶⁰ Johnson is widely considered the most powerful Senate Majority Leader of all time, and his manipulation of cowboy and western mythology had much to do with how he came to this position. In becoming Senator and Senate Majority Leader, Johnson became a man with a persona—a persona almost entirely reliant on the power of mythology. In Johnson's most heated campaign for the Senate, he called upon his farm-friendly voting record and more importantly upon his western persona, to win everything he had been working for his entire life—a seat in the Senate representing Texas.

Lyndon Johnson's 1948 Democratic primary race against Coke Stevenson has been discussed in great detail. Literally hundreds of books have been written about the electoral battle. Here, however, we are specifically concerned with the cultivation of Johnson's image that occurred between 1946 and 1948. The majority of Johnson's biographers acknowledge that a change in Johnson's image occurred before he ran for the Vice-Presidency.¹⁶¹ Few, however, recognize the extent of the transformation that took

¹⁵⁹ Everett Dirksen. Interview with William S. White. Washington, D.C. May 8, 1968.

¹⁶⁰ Katharine Graham. Interview with Joe B. Frantz. Washington, D.C. March 13, 1969.

¹⁶¹ Caro, Conkin, Dallek, and Dugger each speak to this point at great length in their respective biographies of Johnson.

place in the 1948 election. The differences we see between 1941 and 1948 offer the picture of a man deeply concerned with turning real features of his life into images consciously and strategically used to political advantage.

In 1941, Pappy O'Daniel left his Senate seat, and Johnson decided to make a run.¹⁶² Johnson's decision to run in 1948 and not in 1942 was largely tied to new heavy financial support from friends and oilmen George and Herman Brown.¹⁶³ His decision was decisive, and it had to be—to run for this seat Johnson was forced to give up his seat in the House of Representatives. Here, Johnson demonstrated great confidence in his own political future and the power of myth.

Johnson's opponent in the Democratic primary, Coke "Calculating Coke" Stevenson, remains a legend in Texas, even today. Stevenson served as governor of Texas longer than any previous governor. Stevenson was as authentically Texan as men come. Born in a log cabin, he "campaign[ed] almost entirely in the style of the Old West."¹⁶⁴ Stevenson was perhaps the best embodiment of the rugged, violent, individualistic strain of the frontier myth that Texas politics had ever seen. His belief in limited government made him an icon for the conservative faction of the Democratic party in Texas.

¹⁶² O'Daniel "correctly read the signs" that he could not beat anyone in the race, and stepped aside in what the *Lubbock Avalanche* called "the one most constructive act" he had made as a politician. Clearly, a reliance on solely a folksy political image is not enough. George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, CN, 1979), 112.

¹⁶³ Even with this heavy corporate support, Johnson, in his political style, kept Texans on the edge of their seats, not entering the race until the very last minute. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 113.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Means of Ascent* (New York: Knopf, 1990), xxxi.

Ultimately, the battle in 1948 was about Texas at a crossroads in terms of political ideology. The election pitted against each other two men who could not have been more different in terms of both campaign style and their opinion of what the Democratic party should be in Texas. Stevenson was simplistic in his approach to campaigning. The tall man who frequently smoked a pipe felt comfortable one on one with people, and in fact, his nephew later recalled that “he wasn’t a backslapper. He couldn’t work a crowd.”¹⁶⁵ He was old-school politics. Stevenson rejected media and spectacle, preferring instead to drive county seat to county seat, delivering speeches to small groups of constituents.¹⁶⁶ Stevenson’s campaign represents the last traditional, pre-media campaign waged in a rapidly urbanizing Texas. Stevenson was a true westerner and a real life rancher. He had the experience and the myth in his hands. Lyndon Johnson won in 1948 because he recognized the importance of use and dissemination of the myth on a large scale. The use of radio and of helicopters by the Johnson campaign to reach citizens all over the state of Texas was critical in the outcome of the election. Lyndon Johnson, for perhaps the very first time in his political career, understood the full power of cowboy and western mythology used on a national scale.

During the campaign, Johnson balanced on a tightrope. He still had support from the liberal faction of the Texas Democratic party, however, the election with Stevenson was so heated that he knew he would also have to woo a significant portion of the Texas Regulars, the states rights advocates and conservative faction of the Democratic party in Texas, to win. To do this, Johnson endorsed, wholeheartedly, the anti-labor Taft-Hartley

¹⁶⁵ Caro, *The Means of Ascent*, 165.

¹⁶⁶ Caro, *The Means of Ascent*, xxxii.

act, which was heavily supported by Texans. Johnson used Stevenson's refusal to endorse the act against him for much of the campaign.¹⁶⁷ This, coupled with his voting record, largely in support of the New Deal, combined to create the image of a politician who refused precise definition as liberal or conservative Democrat.¹⁶⁸ Stevenson, in stark contrast, ran on a platform that denounced "political promises, excessive taxation, and American communists."¹⁶⁹

In 1948, Johnson worked aggressively to make sure all Texans would know the important lesson that he learned in his 1941 loss to Pappy O'Daniel—that he was one of them: a rancher, a true cowboy, and, most importantly, someone who would work for them in the Senate. Here, Johnson's strong physical presence worked to great effect. At one of his first campaign stops in Austin, Johnson got up to the platform, "sweaty in his well-tailored suit," and made a big show of pulling off his expensive Stetson hat (perhaps *the* definitive piece of cowboy apparel), tossing it into the crowd, and shouting, "I throw my hat into the ring!"¹⁷⁰ All of this posturing worked to enhance the content of Johnson's speeches and reminded the people who came to see them that Johnson was truly a man of Texas.

¹⁶⁷ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 114.

¹⁶⁸ In fact, after the campaign Johnson, though having many connections in Texas, would never develop the sort of well-defined political faction Coke Stevenson had in Texas. His tightrope act ensured his ability to win more voters, but also made firm support from any one group near impossible. Paul Conkin, *Big Daddy From the Pedernales*, (New York: Harlan Davidson: 1986), 116.

¹⁶⁹ Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 113.

¹⁷⁰ Though one boy in the audience recalled it as a "corny" tactic, the speech that followed is described as a "brilliant piece of bombast." Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 299.

Figure #3:



Here, Johnson arrived in Austin in May of 1948. Whereas in previous years, Johnson spoke to crowds either bare-headed, or in a fedora, here, Johnson raised his Stetson, a literal symbol of the mythology he wished to convey to people, in the air, above his head where it would be obvious to all. Johnson used signifiers of the myth to make his appeals more obviously evocative of cowboy and western myths.

In his very first campaign appearance in May of 1948, Johnson opened with rhetoric that made clear his approach to this campaign was very different than his approach to previous campaigns. He began saying, “I intend to straddle no fences and

sling no mud. Texas, and the world, have no time for that sort of thing today.”¹⁷¹

Johnson approached the campaign as a cowboy and a western hero speaking from a place of power. He used vivid imagery evocative of a western persona, a man willing to do dirty work, but not willing to fight dirty. He continued with the statement,

I believe I share this philosophy with most Texans: We'll do anything within reason to get along with our fellow human beings. But we won't stand for being pushed around.¹⁷²

Johnson established himself as a tough guy who was used to farming and wouldn't stand for someone telling him what to do, but also as a compromiser, someone willing to work with others to get the job done. At once, Johnson evoked a stereotypical cowboy persona—a gun-slinging man who won't be pushed around—and the frontier myth of cooperation.

Johnson's frontier-influenced strains of thought became particularly obvious when he spoke of attitudes Americans should hold towards war and communism. In a speech delivered in Austin in May of 1948, Johnson identified “preparedness, peace, and progress” as three points on “the signpost to a better tomorrow.”¹⁷³ Johnson spoke against the violent strain of frontier brutality in this particular appeal. Johnson advocated instead for peace and cooperation. He did not call citizens to battle. Instead, he called them to be prepared to do their part. Johnson's desire for progress was reminiscent of the idea of people in a frontier town working together for civilization. Johnson called Texans together for a common purpose.

¹⁷¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, "LBJ Opening Statement in His Campaign of US Senator," Speech Files, 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 300.

In addition to his use of rhetoric essential to his conception of the frontier myth, Johnson made sure that the media and public were aware of his support of issues considered western, those issues that helped bring civilization and order to places in which no civilization or order existed. A June 1948 news release to all papers in Texas read:

Johnson has long been a champion of rural electrification and has established himself as one of the leading Congressional Authorities on the subject. Through Johnson's efforts two of the country's largest co-ops were established in his district many months before other farm sections began to participate in REA benefits.¹⁷⁴

Here, Johnson presented himself as the man most able to do the job of bringing civilization to a place. Johnson's support of rural electrification literally brought light to towns all over Texas and the West at large. With electrification came civilization, and Johnson wanted all of Texas to know that he was the western hero responsible for this civilization. Johnson used the idea of rural electrification to ease supporters into the other facets of his 1948 platform: conservation, higher pay for teachers, improvement in healthcare quality, the guarantee of reasonable working hours, and a minimum wage. These community-focused initiatives formed the core of Johnson's political identity. They were ideas born of the frontier, and their acceptance was dependent on belief in the idea that human beings should help one another to make a place better.

Also important to Johnson's presentation of himself as hero of the West was a focus on the issues facing the farmers of Texas. A transcript of a speech Johnson

¹⁷⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, "News Release to all Papers by LBJ on REA, June 1948" Speech Files, 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

delivered at least five times: in Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Beaumont, and Sherman, illustrates his focus on and ownership of issues that affected farmers.

I was born and raised on a farm. I milked cows, dipped cattle, picked cotton, weighed it up, and occasionally got to take cotton to the gin...saw my own home place sold because cotton dropped.¹⁷⁵

In announcing his support in this way, Johnson pointed to his personal experiences and emphasized that he was in a position to recognize and understand the problems of farmers and the significance of farm programs to their livelihoods.

Additionally, Johnson used rhetoric to create the image of Texas, and especially West Texas, as a place of mythic significance to the frontier. His words helped establish a clear image of Texas as a place of beauty and importance to America. In a speech delivered over radio to residents of Fort Worth in May of 1948, Johnson said:

You know, if my hometown [Johnson City] were a little larger, we might disrupt Fort Worth's claim to being the place where the west begins. We think the west begins a little east of Johnson City, where the purple hills start rising into the plateau country. Texans like to think of their state as a world in itself; and we who are native to the Hill Country and the Edwards Plateau are inclined to consider ourselves as a special kinds of Texan--the West Texan. If all the stories about West Texans were laid end to end, well it would make enough bragging to fill several volumes of the Congressional Record.¹⁷⁶

Johnson knew that the West was a place important to voters. He recognized the mythic significance of the place in which he was situated, so he presented Texas as the very starting point of the West. He made Texas come alive with his vivid description of its rolling hills. More importantly, he made the people of Texas, and the myths that

¹⁷⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson, "LBJ Lists Farm Accomplishments and Programs," June 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

¹⁷⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Radio Address Over KGKL," May 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

surrounded them, come alive. He made their experiences seem powerful and he made voters believe that he himself was one of these special West Texans, the very embodiment of the myth.

Whereas Stevenson only delivered pre-planned addresses to small groups of Texans, Johnson was in his element delivering impromptu speeches to large crowds all over the enormous state. Johnson was a performer who could sense the mood of a crowd. Though his precise delivery varied, Johnson rarely strayed from a message that advocated government aid and foreign peace and belittled his opponent.¹⁷⁷ Johnson promised that he could be the man to get the job done—to raise the living standards of all Texans— and he promised it in a way that made people feel at ease with him, like he truly was one of them. A Johnson aide remarked, “He [spoke] their language—language they can understand.”¹⁷⁸

Stevenson’s response to Johnson’s employment of a western myth-centered strategy was uninspired. Though Stevenson was a man who was authentically western, a man who was born and raised in West Texas and lived the ranching life of a West Texan, his record had none of the frontier sensibility and populist sentiment of Johnson’s. Stevenson voted to reduce funds for river authorities, cut back on teachers’ salaries, and abolished the Old Age Assistance Fund, a fund specifically created to support the elderly, blind, and dependent children.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Stevenson had popularity and name recognition in his corner. The race was tight.

¹⁷⁷ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 305.

¹⁷⁸ Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 193.

¹⁷⁹ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 316.

On July 24, 1948, Texans voted for their Senator. Unfortunately, this vote would not stand—no candidate won a majority of the vote, and a majority was necessary to secure a winner. Stevenson captured forty percent of the vote. Johnson trailed with thirty-four percent of the vote. Johnson won his own district, the Tenth, and surrounding districts, the Eleventh, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth.¹⁸⁰ A run-off election was scheduled for Sunday, August 29, 1948.

If Johnson wanted to win the Democratic primary for this Senate seat, he needed to solidify his strategy, once and for all. It would be the ultimate test of the broad appeal of western and cowboy mythology. Johnson, though momentarily discouraged by his loss, told friends that he could win if he “worked hard enough.”¹⁸¹ Johnson intensified his campaigning, flying to multiple cities in the same day as Stevenson meandered the enormous state by train. Stevenson was the outdated and old Texas politician. Johnson represented new politics: a man savvy enough to take his life experience and the myth he internalized, and to disseminate it as widely and as quickly as possible.

In the build-up to the run-off election, Johnson called once again upon the lessons he learned in 1941 from Pappy O’Daniel. In that election, O’Daniel filled constituents’ mailboxes with the *O’Daniel News*, a paper outlining his positions and strong connection to the people of the District. In late July of 1948, Johnson launched the *Johnson Journal*, a four-page newsletter created at Johnson headquarters, and made to appear like an old-time, genuine weekly paper. This *Johnson Journal* was distributed to 340,000 mailboxes

¹⁸⁰ Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 318.

¹⁸¹ Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 117.

in Texas with the headline “Communists Favor Coke.” The inside of the paper contained appeals to the common man—the farmer.¹⁸²

In his final speeches before the run-off election, Johnson made sure to clearly state that he was the true candidate of West Texas and frontier tradition. He emphasized his ties to the land and outlined the way that a real Texan would behave in electoral politics. Certainly he attacked Stevenson on the basis of policy, but his more powerful and resonant appeals painted himself as a real man of the frontier and Stevenson as some sort of impostor. Johnson recognized that these personal appeals based on a man’s character, relationship with the land, and relationship with the people of that land were more meaningful and powerful. Greeting supporters at a speech in Houston, Johnson said,

I like to get out and be with people. Texans don’t want a Senator who is afraid to leave air-conditioned hotel rooms and speak to the people.¹⁸³

Johnson purported to know what Texans wanted in a Senator. He said they wanted a man who was not afraid to be with people. They didn’t want a man who was “fussy,” and Johnson implied that “fussy” was precisely the type of man Coke Stevenson was. Johnson presented himself as the true Texas politician, a man not afraid to literally get his hands dirty interacting with the people of Texas.

Johnson used rhetoric to encourage others to imagine him as the candidate of the farmer. He tried to use his own experience living on a farm to appeal to the sensibilities

¹⁸² Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 288.

¹⁸³ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Houston, Texas Address, 8/24/48,” August 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

of the people to whom he spoke. Speaking of himself at an address in Sherman, Johnson said,

LBJ is the farmer's friend. I was born in the cedar brake country near the little town of Johnson City and grew up in those hills. At my father's knee I was taught the wisdom in the words of one of our great statesmen who said the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again...but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in this country.¹⁸⁴

Johnson worked to place significance—literal and mythic—on the vital role of the farmer in Texas. He established Texas and the myth of the frontier as important to everyone in America. He implied that great cities *everywhere* in America, not just in Texas, rested on these prairies and on the backs of these farmers. He said that while we could do without cities, we could not do without farmers, their farms, and the ideas that these important symbols of the myth represent. Later in the same speech, Johnson said Texans were “marching together in this victory march...the Big Texans, with big hearts, strong hands, and cool heads...The Texans who are doers...”¹⁸⁵ Johnson equated being Texan with being a part of the myth. He said Texans were tough folks who got things done. He situated Texans in the frontier mythology as people who did important things, made towns, and most importantly, made America the power that it was. He labeled himself as one of these people.

Johnson, taking advantage of new media and the potential for wide dissemination of the myth that it allowed, used radio to present himself as cowboy. In at least twenty

¹⁸⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, “ Sherman, Texas Address, 8/22/48,” August 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

radio addresses that aired all over Texas— in Austin, in Houston, in San Antonio, in Sherman, in small rural communities that were only able to listen to the message because of Johnson’s support of rural electrification—the same message ran. An announcer boomed it before Johnson even began speaking, and firmly established an image of Johnson as cowboy in the minds of listeners.

This young man comes from the Texas Hill Country and has that hill country look. Six feet three inches tall and weighing more than 200 pounds, LBJ has the kind of rugged frame you expect to find on a Texan. He’s sun-tanned and vigorous... [the crowds of TX] like his aggressive energy, they like his common sense in dealing with our problems.¹⁸⁶

If one didn’t know better, they might think they were listening to a reading of a pulp Western novel. Johnson’s enormous size and strength were emphasized, and these characteristics were tied to the very fact that he was born in the Hill Country. Labeled as vigorous and aggressive; Johnson would fight for people, but not blindly or using brute force, for the message also labeled him as a man with common sense.

In his final address before the definitive vote took place, Johnson presented himself as a Texas boy, a man situated in his place and in the frontier myth. Johnson emphasized the fact that he was Texas born above all other attributes. He emphasized the western issues in his voting record and made clear the importance of these issues not only in Texas, but also in the United States. He made clear that his cowboy identity, so defined by the features of the frontier myth, was the direction in which America needed to look for its leaders.

¹⁸⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Radio Address Introduction,” August 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

I come to you now at the end of this campaign simply as Lyndon Johnson, a Texas boy, born and raised here in Texas...and I think all of these things, building dams, helping farmers, are a part of the long range plan which we should get busy on here in Texas and in the United States of America.¹⁸⁷

Johnson made populism—the idea that he was a simple Texas boy and just one of the common folk—a central theme at the end of his campaign. It is telling that his last appeal was linked inextricably to and centered around the western persona he established earlier in the campaign and not to his voting record or attacks of Coke Stevenson. Johnson recognized what would resonate with his supporters, and that was a man who, like them, had lived this frontier experience. This appeal was powerful because it made frontier and West Texas concerns: concerns with the control of water, aid to farmers, bringing more civilization to a place the concerns of the nation as a whole. Johnson, in his ownership of this myth, fashioned himself a national identity as he made the concerns of Texans problems of national significance.

Ultimately, the run-off was one of the closest elections in American history. Pro-Johnson election judges held back complete election returns from the Texas Election Bureau so that Stevenson forces would not know how many votes they needed to take the election. The lead in vote count alternated between Johnson and Stevenson. Both men went to extraordinary (and illegal) measures to ensure a win.¹⁸⁸ A sort of mini tragedy

¹⁸⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, “8/28/1948 Radio Address,” August 1948, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library & Museum, Speech Files, 1948.

¹⁸⁸ In one county, late election returns received several weeks after the primary had Stevenson mysteriously losing fifty votes and Johnson gaining exactly fifty votes. Fraud abounded in these late returns for “the voters apparently voted in alphabetical order, signed their name to the poll list in blue-green ink...and all wrote alike.” Clearly, the fair play Johnson preached in his campaign image was not of immediate importance to him in actually securing a win in such a close election. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 114.

played out. Ridiculous coincidences abounded, but ultimately, in late September, the Texas Democratic Convention certified (by a vote of 29-28, no less), that Johnson was the Democratic party from Texas' official candidate for the Senatorial general election.¹⁸⁹

Stevenson took the election to court, alleging voter fraud.¹⁹⁰ County election officials, when forced to testify before a court, were vague and seemed to have trouble remembering the events of only a month before. The conservative wing of the Democratic party in Texas helped Stevenson's campaign collect evidence of fraud perpetrated by the Johnson campaign. The campaign filed an injunction in attempt to keep Johnson's name off the ballot of the November 3, 1948 general election. Johnson and his supporters lobbied effectively to postpone election inquiries and prevent the injunction from coming to fruition. Johnson easily defeated a weak Republican challenger. Congressman Johnson finally became Senator Johnson.

1948 was the single most significant year in Johnson's political life. In 1948, Johnson cultivated a national image based upon his lived experiences and a powerful myth. Johnson grew into a politician who recognized and had conscious control over his own image. Johnson recognized the power of the frontier myth, both in Texas and in the nation as a whole, and moved to base his entire image on his myth. Through his support of policies that played into elements of this myth—policies like maintaining peace

¹⁸⁹ Ridiculous coincidence included, but were by no means limited to: a woman calling to change her vote rendering a district a tie, a Johnson staffer having a heart attack in a hallway and surrendering his proxy to a pro-Stevenson delegate, and an absentee balloter who entered last minute from the men's bathroom to cast a decisive vote in favor of Johnson. Caro, *Means of Ascent*, 341. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics*, 115.

¹⁹⁰ And of course voter fraud occurred. Confessions from the Johnson camp abounded. One staffer said, "Of course [Johnson] stole the election. That's why they did it down there." Another added, "Well, Lyndon's backers thought Coke Stevenson had stolen the 1941 election in East Texas and they didn't see anything wrong with doing the same for their candidate in 1948." Dallek, *Lone Star Rising*, 351.

internationally, bringing civilization to places where there was little, and working together as a community to support teachers, the elderly, and children, Johnson established himself as a true embodiment of the feminized strain of the frontier myth. Additionally, Johnson learned to use rhetoric that included signifiers of the west so that even before voters looked at his record, they would know that he was a true westerner. In 1948, Johnson proved once and for all that this innovative approach to politics, combining lived experience with the complex mythos associated with a place and a type of person, was exactly the direction in which national politics was headed. Johnson himself was at the forefront of this American shift in focus to the west.

Johnson's senatorial career presents us with the image of a man clearly gearing up for a national stage. In early 1951, Johnson acquired another important signifier of the western myth he embodied: his very own ranch. The ranch was not entirely political posturing, for it previously belonged to his aunt, and for the rest of his life, even after he left the White House, Johnson poured money into the ranch and enjoyed spending time there.¹⁹¹ However, most importantly the ranch symbolized Johnson's aspirations and became the place he used to hone his political image, the image that he clicked firmly into place in 1948.¹⁹²

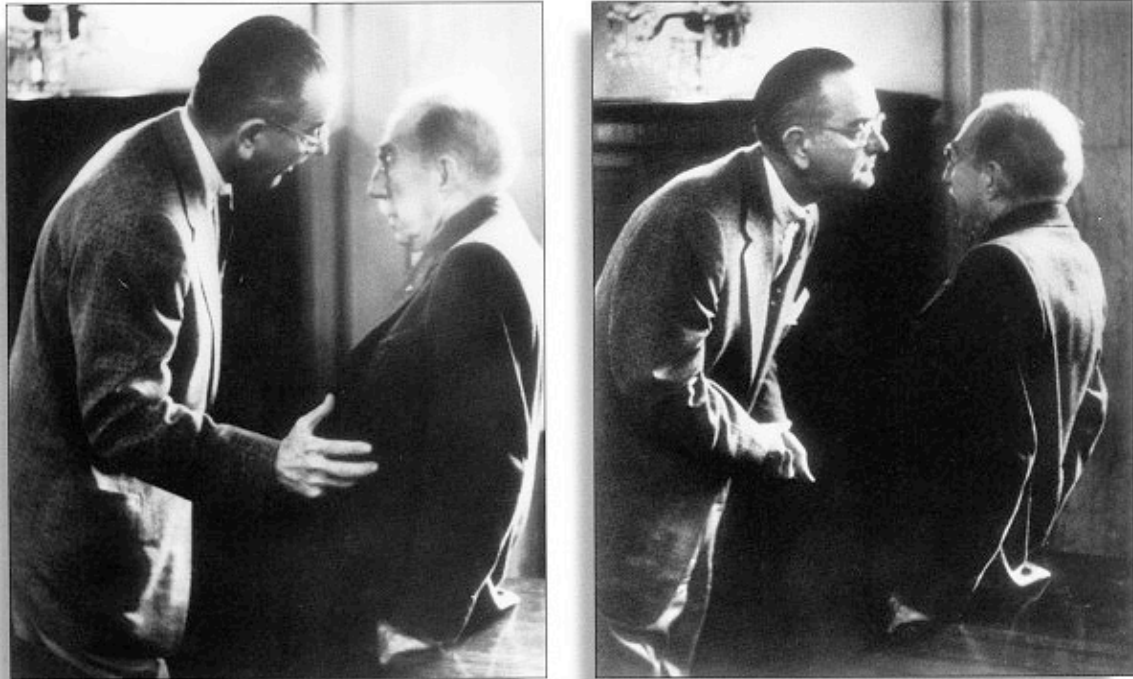
Johnson was a master of the Senate, but he did not become Majority Leader in 1955 because of his emphasis on the cooperative strain of the frontier myth. Instead, Johnson used manipulation of people in power to gain appointment to prestigious committees, and to establish himself as a leader. Though the community-oriented spirit

¹⁹¹ Paul Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers: 1986), 122.

¹⁹² Hal K. Rothman, *LBJ's Texas White House* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press: 2001), 56.

of frontier myth was clearly very much still a part of the way Johnson voted, this voting record was over-shadowed by the aggressive, individualistic approach Johnson took to gaining and keeping power in the Senate.

Figure #4:



Johnson's "Treatment"

Perhaps one of Johnson's most-remembered habits is what historians frequently refer to as "The Treatment." Johnson's "treatment" was essentially a form of bullying, a sort of extreme posturing to get his way. Johnson's arsenal included gentle prodding, begging, logical arguments, stern warnings, threats, and outright intimidation.¹⁹³ Whereas the Johnson of electoral campaigns was a man who emphasized cooperation and working together to bring everyone to the same standards of living, the Johnson of the Senate and

¹⁹³ Tom Wicker, "Remembering the Johnson Treatment," *The New York Times* (May, 9, 2002).

the Presidency was a Johnson drunk with power, a man who would do anything to obtain power and push through legislation he supported. Interestingly, the legislation Johnson supported did not abandon his community-focused strain of the frontier myth. Johnson most frequently supported legislation designed to help people.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy, the Democratic nominee for President (only after a fierce battle with Lyndon Johnson), asked Johnson to join his ticket as Vice-President. Johnson accepted, and after helping to secure electoral victory against Richard Nixon by again calling upon his western heritage, Johnson served rather unremarkably as Vice-President until President Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963. Johnson was sworn in as the 36th President of the United States that day.

In his six-year presidency Johnson at once embodied the characteristics of the community-oriented strain of the frontier myth and the violent, individualistic strain of the frontier myth. Johnson did more than any other President to help the underprivileged in the United States. His community-oriented politics culminated in a series of initiatives labeled The Great Society. The Great Society was an enormous collection of welfare-oriented legislation. At one point, the bills that fit the Great Society label numbered over two-hundred.¹⁹⁴ In 1964 and 1965, Johnson's focused completely on the programs of the Great Society, speaking of the importance of "quality of life, beauty, community, and dignity."¹⁹⁵ He implored all American to strive together towards a utopian ideal. Johnson remained idealistic. He wanted to bring civilization to all Americans in the form of governmental assistance. Perhaps this is most important to emphasize about the

¹⁹⁴ Paul Conkin, *Big Daddy From the Pedernales*, (New York: Harlan Davidson: 1986), 208.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

community-oriented strain of the frontier myth that surfaced when Johnson was President—the belief in the power of government to bring civilization and to enrich the lives of all citizens.

We may be having a very different conversation about the implications for the use of western and cowboy mythology in modern American politics if Lyndon Johnson's story had ended with the Great Society, which was literally an illustration of the community-oriented strain of the frontier myth that developed in him through his experiences in Texas. Unfortunately, Johnson was also exposed to the darker side of the myth, and this masculinized strain surfaced in Johnson's dealings with the Vietnam War.

The violent, individualistic strain of the frontier myth involves a division of borders. The most basic border distinction is the Indian/White distinction, which roughly equates to a civilized/savage distinction.¹⁹⁶ As previously discussed, fundamentally this myth is dependent on a critical assumption, an assumption that Johnson made in his dealings in Vietnam:

the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization¹⁹⁷

Johnson's decisions in Vietnam stemmed from a deep-seated belief in the idea of American exceptionalism, and that exceptionalism was inextricably tied to the frontier. Here, Vietnam was a new frontier to be conquered and Johnson, because of his

¹⁹⁶ *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 1998), 14.

¹⁹⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 10.

internalized conception of myth, believed it was necessary for America to conquer this frontier to maintain a national identity. Johnson took America past the point of no return in Vietnam. Even when things took a turn for the worse, Johnson continued to commit America planes, weapons, and men to Vietnam.¹⁹⁸

In the minds of the majority of the American public, Johnson's involvement in foreign affairs was repulsive and wrong. They viewed America's involvement in this foreign war as a sort of posturing for superiority. America did not want to be defined by the myth that defined Johnson. They did not want to live in a country that was seen by the world as an aggressor who would use violence to achieve national identity and to put its stamp of approval on foreign countries. Johnson, in acting the internalized role of cowboy, in being the bearer of this strain of the frontier myth, saw the public turn against him in large numbers. In a tragic end to the triumph of the first real cowboy President, Johnson decided not to run for reelection in 1968.

¹⁹⁸ Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales*, 244.

Epilogue
Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?:
Do Cowboy Politics Have Staying Power in an Expanding American Political
Landscape?

In her 1998 masterpiece, singer-songwriter Paula Cole, from the depths of her romantic longing, asks a question surprisingly important to an analysis of the post-Johnson American political landscape: where have all the cowboys gone? While Cole is looking for “her John Wayne,” her “prairie song,” and her “happy ending,” we are left to wonder where all of cowboys like Lyndon Johnson have gone. Certainly, we can look to the last thirty years of the Republican party and see the cowboy myth alive. However, while the myth may be alive, Johnson’s preferred version of the myth, the feminized version emphasizing the spirit of community and a connection to the land, is certainly not well.

With Johnson’s decision not to seek office in 1968 came the end of the community-oriented cowboy myth in American politics. Since Johnson, no liberal Democrat has taken up the beacon of cowboy myth in a nationally-significant way. The Republican party, however, is quite a different story. Because of the candidates Republicans nominate, because of the western places they frequently come from, they often identify with the masculinized version of frontier myth that values individualism. Thus, in the past thirty years, conservatives have been responsible for a complete bastardization of what it means to be a cowboy.

The story begins with Johnson’s opponent in the 1964 Presidential Race, Barry Goldwater from Arizona. Goldwater represented the Republicans’ first attempt at appropriation of the masculinized version of the frontier myth. Goldwater presented his

campaign's themes— “downsized government, reduced taxes and regulations, and expanded individual freedoms”— as a special brand of individualism, fundamentally tied to the masculinized frontier ethos.¹⁹⁹

Goldwater developed a ruggedly individualistic and masculine brand of conservative politics. Though born to a life of wealth and privilege, Goldwater thought of and presented himself as a man of the West. He liked to hunt and hike. This, combined with his staunch anti-Communist stance, made Goldwater a politician that Americans responded and related to. The modern, populist brand of conservatism that in later years, George W. Bush used to appeal to people was born in Goldwater. Goldwater rallied a generation of southern whites to the conservative cause.²⁰⁰

Ronald Reagan was inspired by Goldwater's rugged individualistic views about conservatism. In the speech that launched his political career, Reagan discussed his support of Goldwater's 1964 campaign and emphasized the value of this masculinized strain of frontier myth.

The Founding Fathers knew a government can't control the economy without controlling people. And they knew when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose. So we have come to a time for choosing. You and I are told we must choose between a left or right, but I suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down. Up to man's age-old dream – the maximum of individual freedom consistent with order – or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ “Barry Goldwater: No One Around to Fill His Cowboy Boots,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1998.

²⁰⁰ David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2010), 77.

²⁰¹ “A Time for Choosing,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1964.

In 1981, the ascension of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency brought cowboys back to the political mainstream. Reagan was an actor who had literally played cowboys on film. He was not born a cowboy; rather, Reagan came of political age in the era of Lyndon Johnson. Reagan knew that the role of cowboy had mythic significance in the minds of Americans. Because of this, Reagan learned to play the role of cowboy, albeit a very different kind of cowboy than Lyndon Johnson.

Reagan attempted to capitalize on the romantic notion that cowboys are straight-shooting, honest and forthright men who tell the truth. Reagan's act was powerful, and he cultivated the image of cowboy even more successfully and completely than Lyndon Johnson before him. The crucial difference, however, was that Reagan's act was just that — a great performance from a good and committed actor. Reagan was exposed as a liar and a cheat when, in November 1986, it was disclosed that the Reagan administration had been bargaining with terrorists by selling arms to Iran. Reagan went on television and vehemently denied that any such sale had occurred. He retracted this statement a week later. After the incident, popular support for Reagan plummeted.²⁰²

Additionally, Reagan represented a type of cowboy not interested in helping others. Instead, his conception of cowboy was economically conservative. Cowboy, as imagined by Reagan, and later, George W. Bush, was a man who stood up for himself, and only himself. He rejected notions that he should help others. He was individualistic and looked out only for himself. This type of cowboy was manipulated to fit the aims of the Republican party.

²⁰² Michael Lind, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics*, (New York: New America Books: 2003), 77.

Most importantly, Reagan, in his years in office, escalated the Cold War. Reagan was notable among post-World War II Presidents in that he believed the Soviet Union could be defeated through confrontation. This desire for showdown is perhaps the very worst feature of the masculinized frontier myth. Reagan acted as “heroic President:” a leader not acting out the majority will, but instead, acting “out of a higher and more perfect sense of the nation’s mission and necessity than any popular majority could possess.”²⁰³ Reagan acted using this myth as guidance, and perpetuated a nation where violence to justify victory was the norm.

After Ronald Reagan came George H.W. Bush, a wealthy Texas outsider who moved to Houston from Connecticut as an adult. Regardless of this important difference, George H.W. Bush still attempted to present himself as a cowboy in his campaigns for Senate in 1964. Bush failed, however, and the media called his bluff. An article reflecting back on the campaign at its end, said Bush “never quite could convince the people he was really one of them.”²⁰⁴

As President, George H.W. Bush was frequently mocked for his disingenuous cowboy image. Frequently, opposition bemoaned “poor George,” who just “couldn’t help being born with a silver spoon in his mouth.”²⁰⁵ It is important, however, to mention the masculinized strain of frontier myth Bush evoked in his foreign policy because of the impression these policies made on his son. In August 1990, Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded its oil-rich neighbor to the south, Kuwait; Bush condemned the invasion and

²⁰³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 1998), 502.

²⁰⁴ Lawrence J. DeNardis, “Candidates Reflect on a Campaign,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 1964.

²⁰⁵ Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 223.

rallied opposition to Iraq in the United States and among European, Asian, and Middle Eastern allies. Allied forces launched an attack several months later in what became known as the Gulf War. Bush made the decision to stop the offensive after a mere 100 hours. Critics labeled this decision premature, as hundreds of Iraqi forces were able to escape; Bush responded by saying that he wanted to minimize US casualties.²⁰⁶ However, this feeling of an unfulfilled quest haunted his son's political career.

George W. Bush, though raised in Texas, was molded by a significantly different set of factors than Lyndon Johnson and his own father. Bush was born in Connecticut and raised in Houston, Texas. The son of a wealthy family, Bush faced none of the same struggles of Lyndon Johnson. Bush, however, recognized that he could use signifiers of the myth to appeal to Americans. Less than a year before his bid for the presidency, Bush purchased a Crawford, Texas ranch, which he sold immediately upon leaving office. His accent, his vacations on this Texas ranch, and his penchant for country metaphors contributed to his folksy American cowboy image, an image that, like Reagan's, was created almost solely for mass media consumption.

In 2003, using the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington D.C. as justification, George W. Bush declared a "War on Terrorism." Media response accused Bush of being a cowboy. In a rare interview with Vice-President Dick Cheney, journalist Tim Russert asked:

There is a perception, however, if you read any of the papers in Europe and around the world, the constant description of the president as a cowboy, that he wants to go it alone, that the president and you and the administration that was perceived as extremely confident on foreign policy has been stumbling

²⁰⁶ Lind, *Made in Texas*, 131.

and hasn't reached out and nurtured alliances...²⁰⁷

This image of Bush as cowboy evokes the masculinized, ruggedly individualistic strain of frontier myth, and represented all that could go wrong in cowboy politics that subscribed to that particular ethos. Cheney, for his part, emphasized his belief that these qualities in President Bush were positive. Cheney responded to Russert's questioning with an answer that avoided confrontation of the reality of the violence of the myth.

So the notion that the president is a cowboy—I don't know, is a Westerner, I think that's not necessarily a bad idea. I think the fact of the matter is he cuts to the chase. He is very direct and I find that very refreshing²⁰⁸

Bush was depicted as rash. His cowboy attitude was frequently described as something negative. People abroad began to respond negatively to Americans and American culture *because* of what cowboy became in the hands of George W. Bush.

George W. Bush is a fake cowboy. From media accounts, you'd reckon that the president was a buckaroo to the bones. He plays up the image, big-time, with \$300 designer cowboy boots, a \$1,000 cowboy hat, and his 1,600-acre Prairie Chapel Ranch in Crawford, Texas. He guns his rhetoric with frontier lingo, saying that he'll "ride herd" over ornery Middle Eastern governments and "smoke out" enemies in wild mountain passes. He branded Saddam Hussein's Iraq "an outlaw regime" and took the vanquished dictator's pistol as a trophy. As for Osama bin Laden, Bush declared, "I want justice. And there's an old poster out West, I recall, that says, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'²⁰⁹

Bush's foreign policy adventure in the Iraq War is frequently compared to Johnson's experience in Vietnam. In both cases, men embodying the individualistic, stubborn strain of the frontier myth entered into foreign wars which served little purpose other than to spread the conception of American dominance and superiority to other

²⁰⁷ Dick Cheney, "Interview With Vice-President Dick Cheney," Interview by Tim Russert, *Meet the Press*, Sunday, March 16, 2003.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Erik Baard, "George Bush Ain't No Cowboy," *The Village Voice*, September 28, 2004.

cultures. This justification for the killing of thousands of innocents represents what can happen when this violent strain of frontier mythology is brought from widely disseminated fiction into actual foreign policy decisions. It didn't work for Johnson, and it failed for George W. Bush.

Since Bush, there have been few contenders to take up the burden of the furtherance of cowboy and western mythology in America politics. In the current Republican primary cycle, we have seen Rick Perry, Governor of Texas, attempt to carry on Bush's legacy. His approach, which favored showing up to events in a Stetson, dropping cowboy colloquialisms, and speaking in generalities about his political views, has already failed. The remaining men in the field, economic-focused Mitt Romney and ultra-social conservative Rick Santorum have made little attempt to draw upon Perry's approach.

So what does the Republican party's failure at a continuance of the myth say about its future in American politics? Western and cowboy mythology is incredibly gendered and race-specific. Cowboys are white men. Women and minorities have little place in the traditional cowboy-hero story, other than as supporting actors. As our political realm expands to include women and people of color, the cowboy myth has proven inadequate.

More and more rapidly, the American political system, and Americans in general, are moving away from the enormous significance they placed on cowboy and western mythology. In Johnson's early political career, we see a community-oriented version of the cowboy myth that worked in politics. Unfortunately, this success has been overshadowed by the role the more violent strain of the cowboy myth played in Vietnam.

Resuscitations of the myth have been unsuccessful because Republican candidates trying to take ownership of the myth have relied on this self-serving and violent strain of the myth.

For now, Johnson's conception of cowboy and western mythology is all but dead and buried in the American political realm. For a successful employment of this strategy, a politician must attempt to capitalize on this community-oriented strain—the idea that a cowboy is at most fundamentally a helper, not a man of great violence who seeks to venture the uncivilized areas of the world and stamp 'America' upon them.

There are, however, some small signs of life from the myth in Montana. The state's Governor, Brian Schweitzer, represents an example of a western Democrat concerned more with populism and issues of the West than he is with putting on a cowboy hat and getting involved in a violent foreign conflict. In an editorial to the *New York Times*, Schweitzer responded to people who wanted to know how Montana managed to balance its budget. Schweitzer spoke in simple terms that appealed to common people and evoked a particular frontier experience in his answer:

How do we accomplish what most states and the federal government cannot? I like to say we run government like a ranch. In ranching—my old job—you either pinch pennies or go belly-up. We do the same in government. Perhaps Washington can try it.²¹⁰

There are signs that Schweitzer wants to manipulate the imagery of cowboys and the West as well. In what was labeled “a dramatic way to make a point—Montana style,” Schweitzer vetoed a long list of far-right bills with a literal veto branding iron.²¹¹ Schweitzer took offense at the extremist bills the far-right wanted to force on “his

²¹⁰ Brian Schweitzer, “Cutting Costs the Montana Way,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2011.

²¹¹ Mitchell Waldman, “Brian Schweitzer is My Kind of Cowboy,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2011.

people.” Schweitzer, so far, seems to be taking Johnson’s populist, western-image focused approach to politics—and it’s working. An approach like Schweitzer’s—that uses the rhetoric and image, but also has a legitimate populist appeal and concern—could rehabilitate Lyndon Johnson’s preferred version of the myth.

In November of 2011, this Pennsylvania girl made the long trip to Texas. When I arrived in Houston, I was late for my connecting flight, and terribly lost in the airport (because everything really *is* bigger in Texas, even airports). As I hustled past a row of men having their boots shined, I heard a booming voice, a real life cowboy. “Y’all lookin’ for your flight?” Did I judge him for using the phrase “y’all?” Absolutely. But that man became my hero when he followed me through the airport to help me find my gate. My mother tried to tip him, but with a simple tip of the hat he was gone. Cowboys like Lyndon still exist, and the community-oriented cowboy is not dead, though his narrative may currently be in American politics. If we re-conceptualize the myth, if we take it back from the interpretation that spelled doom for Johnson, a new strain of the myth, a strain that includes all people and focuses on the important of all people, could emerge as powerful in American politics. The myth is still very much alive in the American consciousness—and maybe if in twenty years we still can’t find it, we should just go looking in the Houston Airport.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Boatright, Mody C. *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier*. New York: The Macmillan Company: 1949.

Mody Boatright was a prominent Texas folklorist and educator of the early 20th century. In *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier*, Boatright delineates the nature of the tall tale, explores many areas of folk humor, and demonstrates that frontier humor is not born of despair, rather is a manifestation of the buoyancy and optimism of the frontiersmen. This collection is important in establishing importance of the character “frontiersman,” and situating him within the cultural and political context of Texas.

“The Pre-Presidential Papers of Lyndon Johnson,” The LBJ Presidential Library & Museum, Austin, TX.

Thanks to a grant from the Henry J. Copeland Fund for Independent Funding, I was able to travel to Austin, Texas to conduct archival research at the LBJ Presidential Library & Museum. The Library houses forty-five million pages of historical documents which include papers from the public career of Lyndon Johnson.

I paid special attention to Johnson’s pre-Presidential speeches. The Library maintains an extensive collection of several thousand speeches. I went through more than fifty boxes of speeches from the years 1937-1952 to collect the speeches I used in this work. I looked in particular for radio addresses and speeches that occurred at the beginning, near the end, or at a turning point in particular campaigns.

New York Times Article Archive, <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>

I made use of several newspaper articles I accessed through the *New York Times* online article archive. *The New York Times* maintains an archive of more than fifteen million articles. I searched mainly for primary source documents—articles that were written about the major players in the narrative I tell during the time period the narrative occurred. The majority of articles I used were from 1937-1948.

Secondary Sources

Campbell, Randolph C. *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press: 2004.

Gone to Texas engagingly tells the story of the Lone Star State, from the arrival of humans in the Panhandle to the opening of the twenty-first century. The book offers an inclusive view of the vast array of Texans who, often in conflict with each other and always in a struggle with the difficult land, created a history and an idea of Texas. I used this book mainly as a tool of reference. Texas history is complicated and at times convoluted, and *Gone to Texas* helped ensure I had my facts and timeline correct.

Caro, Robert A. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*. New York: Knopf: 1982.

Historian Robert A. Caro is perhaps the most important biographer of Lyndon Johnson. In *The Path to Power*, the first in a four volume work, Caro explores the forces that molded Johnson from early life to his Senate loss in 1941. The biography is unparalleled in its depth and attention to detail, but it paints a decidedly negative portrait of Johnson's big ambitions. Particularly important to my research is Caro's extensive exploration of the role the Texas Hill Country and his grandfathers' Texas populism played in establishing Johnson's political belief system.

Caro, Robert A. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*. New York: Knopf: 1990.

Robert A. Caro's *Means of Ascent* takes Johnson through his service in World War II and the foundation of his long-concealed fortune. Additionally, it delves into the complex mythology Johnson began to build around himself. Most of the book, however is devoted to Caro's revelation of the "true story" of the fiercely contested 1948 senatorial election. Here we see the turning point in Johnson's career, and perhaps in American politics. Johnson becomes the politician he will be: concerned with manipulation of image to win elections.

Conkin, Paul C. *The New Deal*. New York: Harlan Davidson: 2002.

Historian Paul Conkin's *The New Deal* is a concise account of Roosevelt's New Deal Programs and the figures associated with the bureaucracy of these programs. This text is highly interpretive, and is often critical of Roosevelt and his programs. It is helpful in establishing the context in which Johnson became active in politics. It is illustrative of the ideals Johnson valued in his early political career, ideals he would later abandon when it became politically advantageous.

Conkin, Paul C. *Big Daddy From the Pedernales*. Boston: Twayne Publishers: 1986.

Conkin's *Big Daddy From the Pedernales* is a well-written account of Johnson's life and career, and steers clear of controversial treatment of Johnson. Conkin attempts to discover the roots of Johnson's personality in his Texas upbringing and background, but chooses to avoid trying to completely explain Johnson's complex character and personality. As such, Conkin's work presents perhaps the most balanced view of Johnson of the biographies I used in this project. Conkin's biography is used when clarity and perspective of events in Johnson's life are needed.

Dallek, Robert. *Lone Star Rising*. New York: Oxford University Press: 1991.

Historian Robert Dallek's important biography presents Johnson as a complicated and contradictory, but fundamentally good man, deeply concerned with the plight of the poor in America. The first of a two-volume series, this work takes readers from Johnson's birth to his election as Vice-President. This biography, along with Robert Caro and Ronnie Dugger's biographies, form the foundation of my understanding of Johnson's motivations and the factors that molded his political belief system.

Dugger, Ronnie. *The Politician: The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate*. New York: WW Norton & Company: 1982

A journalist deeply rooted in Texas politics, Ronnie Dugger presents Johnson as a highly contradictory figure, torn between the force of Texas and his desire for a more national appeal. This account of Johnson attempts to understand more than Johnson himself. Dugger engages with what he calls the "Johnson era," a fifty year span of American history in which the country engaged with the same struggles Johnson dealt with, most importantly, populism and civil rights. This biography is fundamental to my understanding of the forces that helped create the Lyndon Johnson who ran for office and the Lyndon Johnson who mastered the structure of the Senate.

Egerton, John. *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press: 1974.

Southern journalist John Egerton engages with the South and its profound influence of American politics in this work. Egerton argues that the values of South have become the values of the nation. Primarily, he engages with the concept of racism, which he says is very similar in the North and the South. Fundamental to my analysis of Johnson as national figure is the idea that America, in the 20th century, was engaged in the problem of finding a new national identity for itself. Johnson was from Texas, both the South and West at once, but chose to present himself as a politician from the West. This work examines the problems of America's search for national identity, and its problems with accepting the South.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. New York: St. Martin's: Griffin: 1991.

Doris Kearns Goodwin was a personal acquaintance of Lyndon Johnson, and her overwhelmingly positive biography of him reflects this fact. Chock-full of interesting and revealing personal anecdotes, this work was useful in establishing the personal character of Johnson, a man seemingly confident, but who as, in actuality, constantly and compulsively aware of the image he presented to everyone around him.

Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Movement: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. New York: Oxford University Press: 1978.

Lawrence Goodwyn's *The Populist Movement* offers a history of the agrarian revolt that came to define American Populism. Goodwyn's work is crucial to my analysis of Lyndon's grandfather's involvement with Populism. Populism is something that colored Johnson's understanding of all politics. This work establishes the context in which I work for the rest of my analysis of Johnson.

Green, George Norris. *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-57*. Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press: 1984.

George Norris Green's work is perhaps the seminal (and only) work on Texas politics during this important time period. This book was essential in my exploration of the forces at work in Texas politics during the time of Lyndon Johnson. In this time period, the concerns of Texas and Texan politicians became the concerns of the nation. This work explores these themes, and speaks to a populist and progressive Texas that is often forgotten.

Lind, Michael. *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics*. New York: New America Books: 2003.

Texan writer Michael Lind's work examines the chief crises of George W. Bush's presidency—the economy, the Middle East, and religious fundamentalism—and traces their roots back to Texas, a state that he argues offers clues to the future course of our country. I use Lind's work primarily to aid in my explanation of the political culture that created George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush's use of the masculinized version of western myth.

Martin, Roscoe C. *The People's Party in Texas*. Austin: University of Texas: 1933.

This work examines the roots and sources of strength of the Populist Party in Texas. Lyndon Johnson's ancestors were early supporters of populism, and as such, to

truly understand Johnson, we must understand what Texas populism was really about. This work contributes to this understanding.

McKay, Seth Shepard. *W. Lee O'Daniel and Texas Politics, 1938-1942*. Lubbock: Texas Technical Press: 1944.

This work is a close analysis of W. Lee O'Daniel's gubernatorial and senatorial campaigns for office. It offers close profiles of O'Daniel's challengers for office, including Lyndon Johnson. This work is useful, in that it portrays O'Daniel as a folksy man, beloved by the people of Texas. This is a strategy Johnson successfully adopted in his 1948 campaign against arch-rival Coke Stevenson.

Rothman, Hal K. *LBJ's Texas White House: Our Heart's Home*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press: 2001.

This book, written by Hal K. Rothman, American West Historian, is essentially a biography of a ranch. His account of Johnson's ranch and the things that happened at Johnson's ranch is helpful in establishing the enormous symbolic value that the ranch held for Johnson and in the minds of Americans. Rothman also touches on this symbolism, exploring Western mythology and how it relates to the Johnson ranch.

Schwarz, Jordan A. *The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*. New York: Vintage: 1994.

Historian Jordan Schwarz's work represents a radical, and critical, assessment of the programs of the New Deal. Schwarz argues that New Dealers created new markets in underdeveloped regions of the U.S., particularly the South and West, by weakening the Northeast's control of capital. Schwarz credits FDR's New Deal with expanding state capitalism. He focuses on several New Dealers individually, including two Texans important to my work, Johnson's mentor Sam Rayburn and Johnson himself, who championed regional development. This work is illuminating and helps create the context in which Johnson developed politically, a context that is necessary in explaining how Johnson, and the United States, developed in a post-New Deal era, an era in which Western concerns became the concerns of the nation.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: 1998.

Historian Richard Slotkin's seminal work, the third-volume in a larger collection, traces the pervasiveness of frontier mythology in American consciousness from 1890 to the present. Through Slotkin's work, we see the profound importance of western and frontier mythology in all areas of American life. Lyndon Johnson took advantage of the importance of frontier mythology, and built his image around it. Though Slotkin's work is perhaps hampered by his obsession with frontier mythology's relationship to the

Vietnam War, this work is still perhaps the most important in establishing context and importance of western and frontier mythology in American life.

Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1978.

In this work, historian Henry Nash Smith argues that the spell the West has always held over American people had its most profound impact on American literature and thought during the nineteenth century. Smith shows the influence of the nineteenth-century West in special relation to social, economic, cultural, and political forces. He traces the myths and symbols of the American West. This is another work useful in establishing factors and forces in American life that are Western. The images Johnson used in political campaigns were images important and well-established in all facets of American life, and were easily recognized by all Americans.

The Texas State Historical Association, "A Digital Gateway to Texas History," <http://www.tshaonline.org/>, accessed March 07, 2013.

The Texas State Historical Association's online resource was a veritable encyclopedia of information on everything Texas. I used the website frequently, as a tool to add small details to my descriptions of people, places and events.

Thompson, Patricia Louise Parker. "Y'all Come to the Speakin': Lyndon Johnson and his Speech Writers" Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1997.

This unpublished dissertation examines Lyndon Johnson's relationship with his speechwriters, from his congressional career to his days running for President. The work offers a close analysis of speech drafts, edits Johnson made to these drafts, and transcripts of the speeches as they were actually delivered. This work shows Johnson's conscious manipulation of words to include more colloquialisms and elements of western and cowboy mythology. It also displays how Johnson changed his rhetoric based on who he was speaking to and where he was speaking. It is a truly illumination account of how Johnson used his time talking to the public to his advantage.

Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press: 1993.

In this work, Jane Tompkins examines elements of the popular Western as they appear both in print and on film. She probes the main elements of the Western: its preoccupation with death, its barren landscapes, faithful horses, and tough men, revealing the view of reality and code of behavior these features contain. She considers the Western hero's fear of women and language and his desire to both dominate and merge with environment. Tompkins argues that from elements of the western, American men have learned to behave. For better or for worse, these elements were essential in

shaping Lyndon Johnson. Though Tompkins' work pertains primarily to works of fiction, it also has implications for real human beings, Lyndon Johnson included. His behavior in campaigning for elected office, and acting as political leader, illustrate elements of this cowboy code of ethics Tompkins calls to our attention.

Willis, Gary. *John Wayne's America*. New York: Literary Research, Inc: 1997.

Gary Willis' *John Wayne's America* is the biography of an actor who influenced America and American political culture to a degree that is, of yet, unmatched. Willis describes the ways in which John Wayne came to embody American values and western myth. I use this work primarily to establish John Wayne as a major source of signifiers of western myth. Wayne's physical appearance—his Stetson, cowboy boots, and stance—came to embody American ideas of masculinity and the West.